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Black Mask Detective

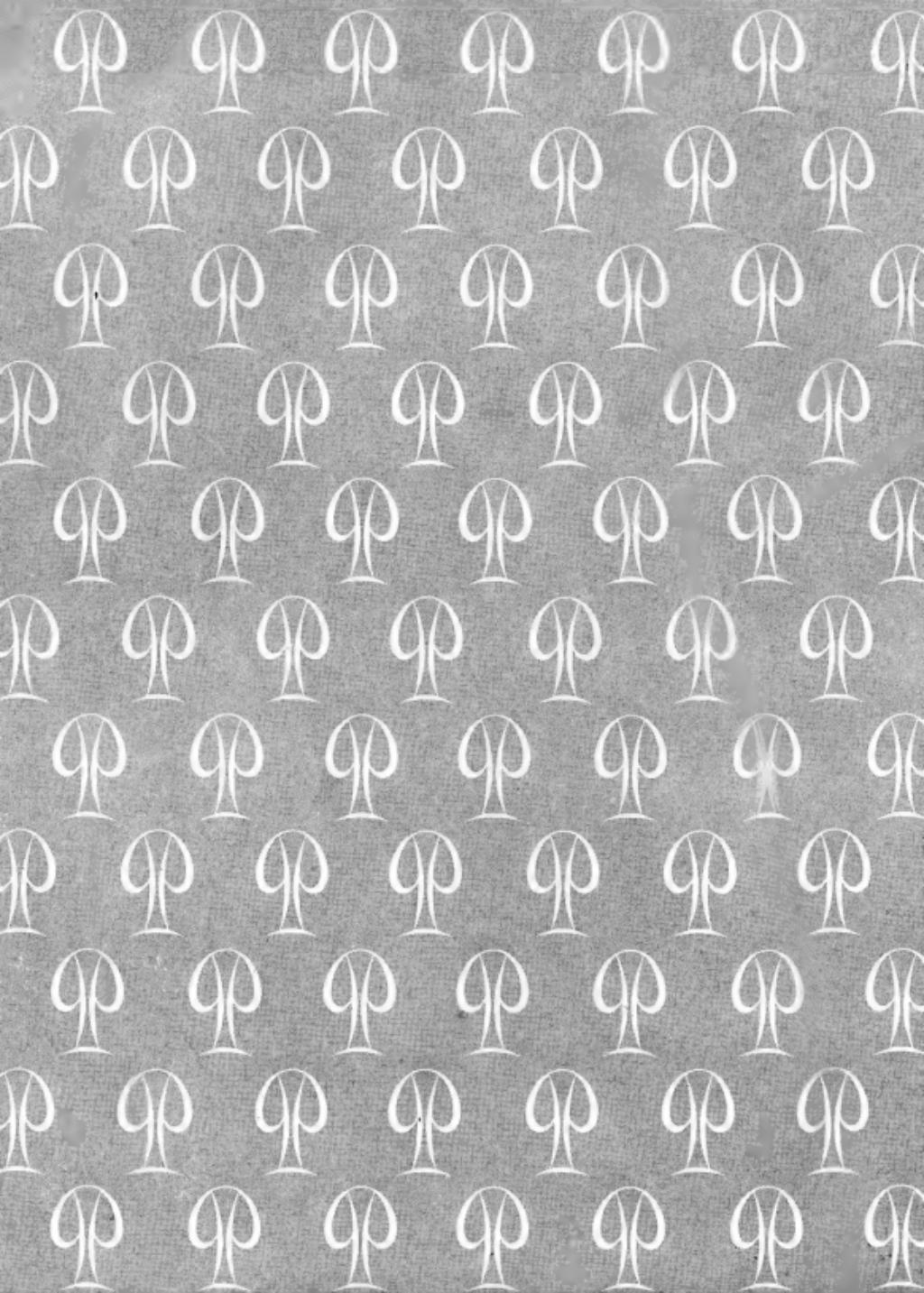
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BLACK MASK

DETECTIVE

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CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 1951

Novel

- HE LOOKED LIKE MURDER.....Cornell Woolrich 40

Novelettes

- SCANDAL-TIME GAL.....Dean Evans 2
THE GREEN WIDOW.....Frederick Nebel 96

Short Stories

- I THEE KILL.....Robert C. Dennis 26
BANSHEERichard Sale 68
FOR THE REST OF YOUR DEATH....Robert Turner 82
THE CORONER'S HAND.....Robert Arthur 87

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It was that grand-daddy of detective stories, Edgar Allan Poe, who started it all with his classic, "The Purloined Letter." Since then nearly every practitioner of the craft has dabbled in blackmail—fictionally speaking, of course. Dean Evans' version of the billet-doux-and-blackmail theme is fresh, fast and hardboiled. We think even the most sophisticated of you will find it packs some real surprises.

Scandal-Time Gal

by DEAN EVANS

ELECTION DAY was just two weeks off and the weather should have been cool. Instead there was a big red balloon of a sun in the sky. It was one of those suns they should keep tied up out in the middle of the desert: a sun that makes varnished Morocco out of your hide while it melts down the nails in your shoes. When the sun beats down like that, you can drink one small beer, step outside and fall flat on your face. A sun like that makes a man do crazy things.

Like me. I was on my way to the jeweler with Uncle Alf's old railroad watch. The watch hadn't run in years, but today, it suddenly seemed the thing to do to have it fixed.

I parked the car down the street from a hotel called the *Oro Del Rey* and walked back. As I went under the marquee a taxi starter poked his head out of the lobby, jerked a look around the street, let out a sibilant blast on his whistle and ducked inside again fast. The whistle sounded like an angry cop on the corner of Vine and Hollywood.

I went on by, went next door to a

jewelry shop run by an old man named Stanley Pawlaczyck, a Swiss who had a Polish name.

"Hot out today," I said. "Can't wind this thing up any more. Wonder what ails it?"

He looked mildly interested. He lowered his old gray head halfway to meet a gnarled hand that was coming up with a loupe in it. He screwed the loupe into the folds of flesh around his right eye, unscrewed the back from the railroad watch, hunched his shoulders and said in an old, old voice:

"Many things it could be. Even many serious, costly things." He smiled at that. "Or perhaps it could be only a broken click spring."

"Oh," I said. "A click spring? Funny names they have for the parts in old clunkers like that."

He put his head down. "A good watch, not a clunker. A nine ninety-two."

"A what, Dad?"

"Nine ninety-two. A very famous railroad watch, young man. But, yes, funny

names as you say. And the names change like the fashions. When I was very young we called the wheel bridges cocks. Wheel cocks. And the wheels themselves," he poked with tweezers, illustrating, "the English named this one the 'great' wheel." He sighed. "We don't call it that anymore."

We seemed to have all the time in the world. There was no other customer in the shop, and I didn't have a thing to do. I put my elbows on the glass of the counter and watched while he took a tiny screwdriver that had a swivel top on it and began to do things with it. His old fingers were as steady as the walking beam on an oil derrick.

"Yes. Broken click spring. Look."

I leaned down. He pushed across the counter with the tweezers. By straining my eyes I could just see a tiny whisper of bright shiny metal that seemed to have a little hook on one end.

"Broken in the center."

"H'mm," I said. "Can you still get parts for it?"

He gave me a smile.

Just then we had another customer, a woman. She came in fast and closed the door by putting her left arm behind her and leaning back against it. Her eyes were big brown lenses that took the place in with two fast clicks.

"What was the name, young man?" the watchmaker asked.

"Edward Barron," I said. "And the address is the Huntington Apartments right around the corner on Hobart. But take the lady first, Dad. One thing I've got is time."

The woman had on a white dress that was crisp even with that heat outside,

and white sport shoes. She wore no stockings. She had nice legs with or without stockings, very nice legs indeed. She had a white hat that looked like a lacy handkerchief. It came down in corners over each ear and was fastened to soft, blondish hair by two big pearl balls. Her mouth was a little wide, but all in all I wouldn't be seeing anything prettier if the day were seventy-eight hours long.

She came away from the door.

The old man pushed a ticket over underneath my watch. He took the loupe out of his eye.

The woman turned brown eyes in my direction. I moved off to a glass showcase with sets of sterling in it. I looked down at the sterling.

The woman took a white leather handbag from under her arm. She put it on the counter, opened it and took out a large pink velvet jewelry box and pushed it over. She didn't say anything.

The old man lifted the lid. What snuggled down inside was about the size and shape of an adult starfish. It was a brooch in yellow gold with a large central diamond and trails of smaller diamonds going off at angles from the center.

The old man whispered to himself: "Lovely. Quite lovely."

The woman jerked her brown eyes over at me. I went back again to the sterling in the case.

"How much is it worth?" Her voice was anxious but soft, as soft as a cat's fur.

The old man blinked. He blinked again. Then he turned, leaned sideways down to a desk behind the counter, got

another loupe, a different kind, twisted it into his eye. He lifted the brooch and brought it slowly upward, tilting it from side to side a little to catch the light. Then he said softly:

"Originally, I suppose it would have cost around ten thousand."

The woman nodded. "How much can I get on it now?"

THAT MADE both of us stare at her. The old man was blinking again and thinking. I was just blinking. He turned his head finally, looked over at my watch as though he'd never seen it before, then looked back at the brooch.

Just then the door opened again. All three of us turned. It was a man this time. He came in fast. He didn't bother to close the door behind him as had the woman. He was small, thin, had on a dark suit that needed pressing. He had a tight small face, tight small eyes, a tight small mouth.

He came down toward us and spoke in a voice that sounded as though it were coming across a bed of decomposed granite:

"You guessed it, people. Dig a hole in the ceiling. *Fast!*"

His right hand was in his pocket. He stood about ten feet from the girl, which put him roughly fifteen feet from me.

I didn't look at the girl. I was looking at the thin small man and at the same time looking at the old watchmaker. The old watchmaker was blinking with the loupe still screwed into his right eye. Then he slowly began to raise his hands. I had mine flat on the counter before me. And then the old man did something he shouldn't have even dreamed

of doing. He dove to the side, and his arm went down like the flick of a lizard. He turned again, just as fast, and his hand came up and in the hand was an old-fashioned six-shooter like you still see in Western movies till this very day.

It was a brave damned fool thing to do and it cost him his life.

The small thin man's fist jerked inside his pocket. There was one shot. It sounded loud and echoing in the confines of the shop. An angry spot suddenly appeared in the old man's forehead, and then nothing else happened after that for a long, long eternity of time.

And then something did. The old man's hand turned slowly to the left on the glass counter top, and the old six-shooter tumbled down and lay gleaming in the overhead light.

I swallowed. And then something else happened. Next door at the Oro Del Rey the taxi starter blew a shrill blast on his whistle.

The thin man listened, tense. His small eyes were beads of heat that chopped holes in the air around him.

The old man's loupe was fluttering now. It dropped, hit the counter, bounced a little, rolled to the edge, fell to the floor and went somewhere underneath. The old man slowly followed it down.

The taxi starter next door blasted out on his whistle again.

"Cops!" I said.

That made the small thin man jerk. His mouth twisted at the corners in what he thought was a sneer, but his eyes were open as wide as he'd ever get them, showing yellows where whites

should have been. His left arm came up swooping, made a grab for the diamond brooch. He had to lean halfway across the counter to reach it, he was that small. He got it, stuffed it in the coat pocket on his left side. He rapped out:

"You're too damn young to die, ain'tcha, buddy?" His right hand inside the pocket moved as he said it. "You're paralyzed, ain'tcha?"

I sure was.

Then he was gone and the front door slammed shut behind him and somewhere outside I heard a car pull away from the curb fast, churning its wheels.

All I could see when I got out there were two taxis making lazy U turns in front of the Oro Del Rey and the taxi starter waving an angry arm.

I went back inside. The woman's mouth was open and her big brown eyes were batting wildly. Her body was starting to tremble like a sheet of paper fluttering in the wind. I went over, grabbed her roughly by the arm and yanked her around facing me.

"That won't do any good! It's done, understand? Done!"

Her mouth went closed with a snap. She took a trembling breath, nodded slowly. I dropped her arm, went around the counter, leaned down over the old man. A lock of his hair had tumbled over the spot on his forehead and was stained a color that wasn't gray any more.

I got up, looked around for a telephone. There didn't seem to be any. I came around the counter once more, went to a door in the middle of the rear partition, went through it, looked around, saw the phone over on the desk

in the corner. I called Central Homicide, told them I'd wait, put down the phone again and went back to the front part of the store.

I was all alone. The woman had gone. . . .

TWO PROWL boys came first. They hung around, keeping the front door shut against customers if there had been any. There weren't. And then a few minutes after that two men in plain clothes came in. One was dark and tall, with a hungry look. The tall one flicked a finger at the cops and they went away. The other was red-faced and had a whiskey look. He didn't do anything.

"Behind the glass counter," I said. "On the floor."

The tall one nodded, went around the end, stooped over. The red-faced one looked at me, came over, patted me. He looked at me again with a hurt look in his eyes as though he'd expected to find a flask on my hip. Then he went over to the glass showcase and looked down at the sterling.

The man behind the case came up. "Nice one. Straight between the eyes. Small. Probably a twenty-two." He looked over at me, frowned, said: "How far away was the guy who shot him?"

"About fifteen feet," I said.

He snorted disgustedly. "Cripes. Knew what he was doing." He came around the counter, came over to where I was standing. He snapped his thin fingers at me.

I gave him my wallet. He looked at the card, cocked an eyebrow. "Private detective, huh? What were you doing in here?"

The red-faced one lifted his head from the glass showcase. "What is it with him, Herman?" he said.

"I was having my watch fixed," I said. "There it is over on the counter."

"All right." He gave me back the wallet. "Let's have it now. Everything, from the minute you came in the door."

I told it to him. I told him everything I could remember even down to the taxi starter next door blowing his whistle. To that he said:

"You think he got the idea the whistle was a cop?"

I shrugged.

"Got scared, huh? I suppose." He snorted again. "Must have been damned scared." He looked at the red-faced man. "Feeney."

"What is it with you, Herman?"

"Cut that, will you? Go on out, tell that starter to blow his whistle."

The red-faced man started forward. Then he stopped, blinked stupidly. Outside, the taxi starter blew hard on his whistle. The red-faced man began to grin. "What is it with him? A mind reader."

"It does sound like a police whistle at that," said the tall one to me. "All right. So he got scared. Who was the woman you mentioned?"

I shrugged again. "She didn't say."

"Uh-huh. Tell me about her again. Everything. What she looked like. How she talked. What she said. How she seemed."

I repeated it. I put it down one word after the other. And when I was through he said:

"Maybe we're looking at this wrong. Maybe this guy wasn't scared at all.

Maybe he came in just for the one thing; when he got the brooch that's all he wanted. Worth ten thousand, the jeweler said?"

I nodded.

"H'mm. Nervous guy, huh? He shot like that. He was nervous and he stayed only long enough to get the brooch." He shook his head. He snorted, looked at his feet, looked up again fast. "Geezl!" he complained.

"What is it with you, Herman?"

"Will you please cut it out!" The tall one glared. Then he turned to me, bit off sourly: "A fixation. That's what is it with *him*, a fixation."

After that the lab boys came and then the M.E. They worked quietly, quickly. Then we all went downtown together, me to sign statements and to spend the afternoon in the projector room watching slides thrown up on the wall instead of looking at the steel picture racks as in the days of old.

They didn't give me back my watch. I didn't recognize the thin small man with the sandpaper voice and the clever gun. That made us even.

CHAPTER TWO

I GOT HOME about five-thirty. I was hot, dry as dust, and my eyes burned from the glare of the projector. I got a cold bottle from the icebox, knocked off the cap and took it from the neck.

Downtown they were like Herman's partner. They had a fixation. They figured the killer had been after the brooch and only the brooch; that he had come in, burned the jeweler down, got the brooch and that was that. They

didn't have any fixations about why he had done this. On that part of it they didn't have anything.

My mouth tasted like a wool sock. I got another beer. This one I poured in a glass.

That was when the knock came.

It was a soft knock, a rubbing sort of a knock; the sort of a knock that wants you to hear it but only you, nobody else. I put the empty beer glass in the sink and went to the living room and opened the door.

She had on a bright print dress this time that had a breezy cape hanging from the shoulders. Her soft blondish hair was half hidden under a small hat of the same material as the dress. Her nice legs were still bare, and she wore dark shoes to match the dress. She had no handbag.

"I'd like to come in." She said it in one of those tones that was all out of breath.

She didn't wait. She moved forward, slipped on by me as I went back a step. She got her left arm behind her, leaned back and closed the door exactly as she had closed the jeweler's door the first time I laid eyes on her.

"Do you always close a door like that?"

She didn't seem to hear. She said in that same out-of-breath tone, "I'm in trouble. You can help me."

She was doing fine. We'd met just a few hours before at somebody's murder and now she was telling me she was in trouble and I could help her. I gawked for a moment, then shut my mouth with a snap and went over to the little cabinet where I should keep my pipes

if I had any pipes, and took from it a bottle and two glasses. I poured, put hers on the coffee table before the sofa.

"You're doing fine," I said. "You know who I am, know where I live, think I can help you. You're doing fine."

She said quickly: "In the shop. When I came in you were just telling him your name and address. That was before . . ." She stopped. A wild glaze shot through her brown eyes.

"All right, all right! So you've got a memory. So you looked me up in the phone book, and I'm a private detective and you're in trouble. Why did you run away?"

She ignored it. She went to the sofa, sat down, curled her small hand gently around the glass and held it motionless like that as though her fingers were the tendrils of a sweet pea growing around a fencepost.

"I'm being blackmailed, Mr. Barron."

I jumped a little. I studied her, studied the slim loveliness of her, the worried sickness of her eyes. I put down my drink and came over and sat down next to her.

"He hadn't seen you before, had he? He didn't just come in there for the brooch?"

"Yes. I mean no. I—I don't know who he was."

I nodded. That took care of Homicide's fixation. "Where did the brooch come from?"

"It's been in my family." She brought up her brown eyes underneath lashes long enough to sweep the back porch. I looked at them, jerked a look down at the drink in her hand. She lifted it, sipped it once. Then she put it down

and folded her hands and looked down into them.

"I had to get money. He wanted five thousand."

I let that one go by.

"He was very nice. Very glamorous. It was during the war, and he was an officer on a Liberty ship. I wrote him a letter once."

The pattern.

"He isn't glamorous now," I said.

"No." She looked at me. There was no rancor, no sarcasm in her voice. She spoke fact, a statement of fact only. "No, no he isn't glamorous anymore."

"You were married then?"

"Yes."

I tried thinking about that but there didn't seem to be much in it I could shake around. I said, "All right. The war years were long hard years for all of us, I guess. And sometimes they made you do funny things. I'm wondering what kind of a guy he is, but that's all right too. Who are you?"

"Sarah Hurd. Mrs. John Lenson Hurd."

MY EYES didn't jerk when she said it. They wanted to but kept them quiet. I got up, went over to the radio, got my drink, put it down my throat. Only then did I look at her and say as hopefully as I could:

"Not the wife of *State Senator* John Lenson Hurd? Not that Sarah Hurd?"

"Yes."

And that got dead air between us.

"You know your husband goes to the polls in two weeks to vote for himself for a second term?"

"Yes."

"And something like this would make mincemeat out of him?"

"Yes."

"And I'm the patsy you pick on to put his foot down on it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be!" I glared at her. She swallowed rapidly like a puppy in bad trouble. She didn't say anything. "That all you can say—just that one word?"

She didn't say anything to that, either. She lowered her head and stared into her hands and stayed like that until:

"He isn't very nice, as a husband. But he doesn't deserve that. Not from his wife he doesn't. Not that."

I poured out another drink and downed it like the first. I knew less than nothing about State Senator Hurd, which seems to be the way of a man with the representative he elects. I looked out the window toward the Pacific and the sun sliding down out of sight on the way to Japan. It was a hot, red half of a thing that looked like one of Dali's flexible timepieces just melting off onto the floor. I wasn't sorry to see it go.

"His name is Geordie Clausen and he lives at 10470 Campbell Boulevard."

I looked back at her. "All right," I said. "I like blackmailers like I like March fifteenth. And I like that like I like spiders in my dreams. All right, I'll see what I can do."

She stood up fast. Her eyes went wide as though she couldn't quite believe what I'd just said. She came across the room and stood very close to me, and her skin in the fading glow of the disappearing sun had the softness of a blanket on a sleeping baby's crib. Her

brown eyes were looking into mine.

And then her arms came up and went around my neck, and her lips pressed against my own. And I thought to myself, *Good Lord, Madam.*

THE PLACE was originally one of those box-type office buildings that hadn't done so well; it had changed to a walk-up and later again to just plain hall bedroom.

I went across a dirty, white-tiled area with the numbers 10470 inset in it, and into a tiny cubicle that had once held the building directory. It now held a bank of tarnished brass mailboxes and one yellowed, naked electric light bulb on a cord that burned off the wings of insects that tried to hug it to death.

He'd been here a while; he had a mailbox. There was a letter in it, and on a rectangular piece of soiled paper on the outside of the box was his name and the number seven. I began to climb the steep wooden stairway.

The hall was covered with a dusty rubber runner that was worn quite badly in front of one particular door. I went on by that, went down to Room Seven. I rapped.

Suddenly, down at the other end of the hall, a door opened and an old crone stuck her head out and squinted my-optically. Then she pulled her head back in and the door slammed behind her. It was one of those places: whisper and they call the cops; let a woman scream and everybody's tone deaf.

Nothing happened inside Number Seven. I tried the knob. It turned. I went in.

It was a square room with a greasy-

looking electric fixture in the absolute center of the ceiling. There were two windows, one in each of two walls. Between the windows in the corner was a bookcase which seemed to be homemade and in it were several thick books on navigation. On top of the case was a model of a clipper ship in full sail. Against the back wall was one of those paper wardrobes with the doors hanging open. Clothing inside, but not much.

A cheese-cloth rug on the floor. On the rug an easy chair with the cushion sunken on broken springs. Next to the chair a brand new, glittering chrome smoke stand with a carton of butts in it. A dresser, top littered. And against the remaining wall a bed.

He was lying on the bed on his back. He was large, had long legs. He was wearing trousers that looked as though he'd slept in them all season long. He didn't have any shirt on nor undershirt either. Scrawled across the bare skin of his chest with a ball pen were the words: *This guy couldn't steer straight.*

Above the words in a spot at about where his heart would be was a purple hole.

I didn't spend too much time looking at him. I went over to the bookcase and took down a volume and looked at the flyleaf. Written inside was the name *G. Clausen* and the date, 1941. I wiped off the book with my handkerchief, put it back. Then I went back to the bed. I didn't want to do what I had to do but there wasn't any help for it. She hadn't told me what he looked like.

I got my hand under him. I felt for a wallet. No wallet. Then I remembered

the paper wardrobe. In it I found the coat to the trousers he was wearing, and his wallet.

It was Clausen, all right. Seaman's papers inside the wallet proved it. I wasn't sure whether I thought his photo looked glamorous or not. Certainly he himself over on the bed didn't, for in addition to the hole in his chest there was one other thing that I was trying not to think about: somebody had bashed in his face.

I turned off the overhead light, went out the door. Nothing happened; the old crone didn't pop out. I went downstairs. I got down to the cubicle and looked at the mailboxes. It was one of those things you do, an automatic gesture only. I looked at the letter in his particular box. Another automatic gesture without meaning, without significance.

I took the letter out of the box and turned it over. It was addressed to him but it had an A.P.O. address, not this one on Campbell Boulevard. It was in a woman's handwriting and the postmark was April 1944.

I took a breath and pried my fingers loose from the envelope and stuffed it in my pocket and went outside in the night air and went down the block to where I had my car parked.

When I got to the Huntington Apartments I went upstairs and got the scotch bottle and put it to my lips and let it stay there until it started to work for a living.

After that I took the letter from the envelope and read it and stood there thinking and remembering the way she'd spoken to me of her husband. I

remembered, too, the way she'd kissed me. And, remembering, I could understand something of a letter such as this.

I sighed. She'd signed it Sarah. She hadn't been careful even about that.

CHAPTER THREE

I PUT THE letter back in its envelope and returned it to my pocket. Then I got the scotch bottle once more and took it over to the mirror on the wall above the sofa and hoisted it to my lips and watched myself take a drink.

"You're getting to be quite a drinking man, Barron," I said to the guy in the mirror. He sneered back at me. I put the bottle down on the radio and got the telephone book out. She answered on the first ring, as though she'd been expecting it.

I said, "You can sleep tonight. At least I think you can. There was just the one letter?"

"Yes. You met him? He gave it to you when you went over there?"

"I said you could sleep tonight."

"Could you come over?"

"Your husband isn't home?"

"No. It seems he had to attend a meeting tonight. Could you make it right away? There was something else . . ."

"Something else?"

She didn't answer. A tiny buzzing, an almost imperceptible thing, accented the silence of the wires between us. Then:

"I had a phone call a half hour ago, Mr. Barron. A man called. He said it was important, that I had better see him. He wouldn't tell me what he wanted at

first and then—and then he mentioned the letter."

The phone in my hand felt like the heavy end of the Golden Gate.

"I didn't know what to do. I was terrified. I told him he'd have to see you. I—"

"That's just dandy," I croaked. "You told him my name and everything? Just like that?"

It seemed just a little too much to bear. I held the phone with both hands and looked at the Scotch bottle and wiped my lips with my tongue.

A little more silence. Then: "Would you rather I *hadn't*?"

Possessive. She'd kissed me; that made the difference. Possessive. I said weakly: "All right. You told him my name. And then what?"

"He hung up. And then a while later he called again and gave me a phone number for you to call back. He said to ask for Suite Seventeen. He hung up again and I called you right away but you were out. I was just going to call again when you called me."

I thought about it. I kept staring at the scotch bottle and feeling the weight of the phone on my arm muscles.

"Mr. Barron?"

"All right. Give me the number."

She told it to me and I took one hand off the phone and pulled a little pad over and wrote it down.

"You'll call me back, Edward?"

Edward, now.

I put down the phone and ran a hand across my forehead. I tried to think back, to remember if there was anything in the room I might have touched that I hadn't wiped off. I gave it up and

went over and got the bottle and made it look sick. Then I went back to the phone and dialed the number.

I got a pleasant feminine voice. "Good evening. Oro Del Rey."

I didn't like it. I suddenly didn't like it as an inflamed bunion doesn't like a tight shoe. I put the phone down and blinked over at the empty scotch bottle and began to feel the snakes under my shirt. I was thinking that the Oro Del Rey was right next door to an old Swiss jeweler with a Polish name who hadn't managed to get through the hot afternoon.

But I didn't have to worry about it long. The apartment door made a little clicking sound at the lock, and the door opened inward.

There were two of them. It seems there always are. Neither one was the small thin man with the tight small face and the sandpaper voice and the educated gun. They wore dark clothing and dark, snapbrim hats and they looked as if they were just getting in from a show and a late supper. Except that both of them had guns. The one on the right said:

"You Barron?"

I didn't have to answer that. They knew who I was.

"Where you been lately, Barron?"
Jokers.

"I just got in from a Canasta club."

THE ONE on the left sucked breath in through spread nostrils big enough for a horse. He came over to me. He brought the gun up in a lashing stroke that tried to cut my neck in two. I rolled with it, tried to fall back out of

range. I succeeded—a little. The sight on the front of it raked across my chin and caught my cheekbone on the way up.

He said calmly, "Wisenheimer, huh?"

The other one, the one still over at the door, said, "I hate these smart punks. I hate their damn guts."

The one with the nostrils said, "Yeah." His left hand padded quickly over me. He cocked an eyebrow, muttered, "No iron."

"Let's part his hair," said the one at the door.

"Hell. *He* wants to see him first. Remember?"

"Just a little, I mean."

"Yeah." He curled his mouth at me, opened his eyes wide. There was something in the eyes I didn't like, a something nobody would like. I didn't have to ask to see the needle marks on his arm to know what he was.

I blew a weak breath in his face and watched his nostrils flare at the smell of the scotch. He danced behind me, put the gun at the small of my back, snapped:

"All yours, Gaston!"

The man at the door grinned. He began to pull up his gun, muzzle foremost, in a movement he'd probably had lots of practice on. And then he stopped, smiled a bright cruel smile and put the gun away.

"This way'll be better. The other's too damn fast." His closed fist slammed into my face. He pulled back, brought up his elbow at a level with his shoulder, crooked a little to give a swiping movement. Then he lashed at me again. I rode back against the gun; it was in-

sane but sometimes reflexes are. His fist connected anyhow and the lights in the room started to whirl like a kaleidoscope gone mad.

I remember the night clerk's startled look as somehow I floated in the center of supporting arms across the lobby downstairs. I remember a voice chortling something about poor old Barron having one too many. I remember hitting the cold night air outside and my dragging feet playing hell with the shine on my shoes.

After that there wasn't anything at all until I heard a sharp voice demand, "What in hell! I told you to get him, not kill him."

Another voice said: "Yeah, I know, Mr. Flehr. I know. But we couldn't help it. The lousy so and so tried to beat our brains in. There wasn't anything else we could do."

And the sharp voice, "All right. Put him in that chair. Anyone see him downstairs?"

"We took the freight elevator."

"Very well. Get out."

I didn't hear anything else just then. All I wanted to do was lie down somewhere with a good doctor and maybe two or three nurses to see me through the long night.

That mood passed. Another took its place. In this one all I wanted to do was lean over the railing and close my eyes against the waves rolling down below and let go all over the mackerel and the albacore. That one was a pip; that one had fire and zing behind it. That one got somewhere.

A sharp voice said, "Soldier, did it have to be *my* shoes?"

I raised my head and took up the option on my left eye. I saw a face hanging somewhere in the middle of the room about shoulder high to a Great Sequoia. The face was indistinct, fuzzy. It wasn't a very pretty face. I'd seen better faces on clocks. I leered at it.

"Your okay, Soldier. The boys got a little conscientious but it'll pass. What would you know about politics?"

"Pol'tics?" I gurgled.

"It's a funny thing, Soldier. You take three candidates for State Senator. Line them up, vote for one. Does it matter who? That's how *I* feel about politics."

His face was clearing now and he was shrinking. He wasn't a great Sequoia anymore; he was only a midget ten feet tall.

HE SMILED a gentle smile. It must have been quite a trick, for his eyes were the color of cyanide-treated steel. His mouth was thin and hard, and he had a jaw under translucent skin you could have hammered down for a horseshoe.

"But who am I, Soldier? It would seem somebody higher up doesn't like one of these candidates for State Senator. Let's say he doesn't like John Lennon Hurd."

"G-go to hell," I gurgled.

"Probably, Soldier, but let's not push it, shall we?"

He wasn't ten feet tall any more. I sat up and blinked painfully.

"Well, as the saying goes, that's where I come in. Feeling better? Fine."

"You're bleeding," I growled weakly.

"I bleed easily. Where's the letter? It isn't much, but every little bit in a smear campaign helps, you know."

"Letter?"

"Oh, come now. We offered Clausen a thousand for it. He accepted. I sent the boys over to collect, and it seems he'd changed his mind. He said he'd already sold it to somebody else—the woman. And of course that's where you came in."

"He did, huh?"

"Look, Soldier . . ."

"*He did, huh?*" I said it with an ace-up-my-sleeve look on my battered face. I hammed it. I pushed my mug out into the open air and I hammed it—and the letter was in my pocket snuggling against my ribs as every word of it came out.

It was his turn to blink now. He appeared to be studying the situation. He went to a card table across the room and found a bottle on it. He poured a little out into a glass and held it against the light and then tossed it down and said softly:

"Both my ears are open, Soldier."

"Got the early edition of tomorrow morning's paper?"

"I can get it."

"Do."

He went to the phone. Then we waited. He appeared not to be liking something, and his fingers drummed on the card table. When the paper came he brought it over, threw it in my lap.

It was on page two. It wasn't much but it was there. It told of a shooting in a jewelry shop, a shooting witnessed by a private detective named Edward Barron and an unidentified woman who fled before the police got there. It mentioned very briefly that according to the private detective, the killer had made off

apparently with just one thing; a large and expensive brooch belonging to the woman. The private detective had been a customer in the shop at the time of the shooting.

His purple-steel eyes read it over my shoulder.

"The unidentified woman," I said impressively, "was Senator Hurd's wife. She brought the brooch in for appraisal. She wanted to sell it to raise five thousand to buy back the letter. She didn't have the ready cash; the brooch was all she had."

"It says you were a customer."

I was still hammering it. Strong. I let him see my eyes, let him see the look there.

He nodded. "I see. That's the story you told the police. Who was the killer?

"I wouldn't know. He was small, thin, had a voice with too much crushed stone in it. He carried the gun, probably a .22, in his pocket. He shot from the pocket. He shot him once and the slug went through the guy's forehead."

"He was that lucky." His eyes were closing thoughtfully.

"Or that good. The police have a very nice theory. The police believe he was after just the one thing, the brooch. He had to kill, but he got it. And after he got it that was all he wanted; he walked away again."

The thoughtful look was going deep into his eyes. "Is that the way it really happened? He took just the brooch? Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"I see. It would seem that someone

else has a very good lobby working right now. But I can't see the angle except that it would prevent her from buying back the letter to protect her husband, or herself."

I shrugged expressively for him. I said: "Three candidates in the race for senator, you said. Maybe somebody had an idea, too, not knowing yours, of course. And we don't know his either."

"It's possible. A small man?"

"Small. Thin. Tight mouth. Talks hard with a rough voice. Shoots through his pocket and hits. And what's more he isn't on file down at Headquarters."

"All right, Soldier. Sorry you had to get mussed. I'll take you home."

"Don't bother. There are taxis. One other thing you maybe don't know: The jewelry shop is right next door."

"What?"

I nodded. I watched a puzzled look filter through his eyes, watched his mouth work a little. He said finally, "I'm beginning somehow not to like surprises."

"That's too damned bad," I said.

"All right, Soldier, you can go." He brought out his gentle smile, let me see it all the way over to the door. Then he said good-by, still giving me that gentle smile.

"I like you, Soldier. It would be too bad if anything made me change my mind, wouldn't it?"

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN I got home I didn't expect to see her. Of course I wasn't thinking too much about anything at the

time. The apartment door was open, they had probably left it like that when they carried me out. If I thought anything, it was certainly not to wonder about the open door.

I started across the living room to the little cabinet where I don't like to keep pipes.

"Edward?"

I jerked around and saw Sarah Hurd standing there.

"Edward!" Shock sounded in her voice.

This time she was wearing a fluffy, light-colored coat over a black dress with gold sequins. No hat. Her hair was done neatly, little bangs in front and curled back at her ears.

She dropped a white bag on the sofa and came at me with her large brown eyes staring.

"You've been hurt!"

I didn't say anything to that. It seemed pretty obvious.

"Take off your coat. Lie down!" She was taking control as if she were accustomed to these setups.

"The little cabinet, the pipe cabinet," I said wearily. I went over to the sofa and flopped down on it.

She found the cabinet. She looked in, clucked impatiently, went to the bathroom. She came back with a wet towel and a bottle of antiseptic.

"Not that," I grunted. "The little cabinet over there."

She shook her head. "Hold still now."

I didn't care. I didn't give a damn. I let her work on me with the wet towel and the antiseptic, and I didn't give a continental.

"Tell me how it happened." There was something in her voice. If I were still a little boy it would have been my mother's voice.

I opened one eye. "Little cabinet," I croaked weakly. I like an effect as well as anybody.

She bit at her lower lip. She shook her head, determined. I groaned dizzily. It was a hollow groan. It sounded swell.

I groaned again.

She got up fast, flew to the cabinet, got out a bottle—not antiseptic—and brought it over. Then she realized she didn't have a glass. She went back for one. By the time she got it, I had the bottle to my mouth.

"Edward!"

I grinned.

"I don't think that's at all funny! You had me worried sick. . . ."

"Did I, Mrs. Hurd?"

That made her redden, a very little. And not for long. She tossed her head, threw off the light coat and went down on her knees before the sofa. She looked like a hundred million bucks. Politicians were lucky guys.

"You darn fool," she said. "You darn fool."

"Me?" I said.

"You might have been killed. How did it happen?"

I looked at her. "You really want to know?"

"No. Not really, I guess. As long as you're all right. As long as they didn't. . . ."

I blinked. Not one word about the important thing. Not one peep about the letter. "For heaven's sake don't

cry," I said nastily. I wasn't used to attention.

I got the letter out and handed it to her. Her eyes widened and she took it, pulled it out of the envelope. Her eyes flicked at a line or two. She reddened again. "Did you—did you read it?"

I didn't answer that. I put the bottle to my mouth and let it steam around inside me while she got over it.

"Match," I said.

She handed me a little toy golden lighter. I pulled my smoke stand over, took the letter from her fingers, lit it with the little lighter. I held it until the very last and then dropped the black ash into the stand. She watched me do it without a trace of anything in her eyes.

"What kind of a guy is this husband of yours?" I asked. "Tell me about him."

"He's a very good man. Edward. He's a very good senator, and next year after he's reelected, he wants to get through a bill that will outlaw gambling."

"They've got a bill."

"I know. It seems his is different. His has teeth in it. He's a wonderful legislator."

"Uh-huh," I said. "He probably is, at that. Now turn the record over. What's he like when he gets home from these late meetings of his?" There was no end to my nastiness this evening.

"I don't think I like that, or deserve it, Edward."

"Don't, huh?" I flicked a look at the ash in the smoke stand.

SHE saw the look, reddened again. The color started to come up high, up around the area of her cheekbones. Her lips opened

"I didn't mean that," I growled. "Dammit, don't look so guilty. I believe you wanted that letter so they couldn't throw it at him. I always did believe it."

The look began to recede. "He says I hold him back in his career. It seems I don't mix well in his circle. I offered him a divorce but he won't take that. It seems everything I do is wrong somehow. Like not realizing a divorce right now would hurt his chances of reelection. But I know now, of course. He told me."

"I'll bet he did," I said. I looked at her. I was right the first time, only not enough. If the day were seventy-eight years long I'd never see another like her. "Lean over," I said.

She put her fingers on my chest, bent down.

"Now kiss me," I said.

"Dear. . . ."

Dear, now?

I shoved my fist through her soft blondish hair. I did a swell job of mussing it up. I growled: "Who's the darned fool now? G'wan home. He's probably back from his meeting, wondering where the hell you are. G'wan home. And don't write me any letters. I'll send you a bill."

I got up and looked at the bottle. I put the bottle on a nice swing that would tip it right down my throat. Out of the corner of one eye, I watched her slowly put on her coat, slowly put the golden lighter back in her bag, then

slowly go over to the door. She was almost through the doorway before she turned around again. She was swallowing rapidly.

"What about my brooch, Edward?"
"Brooch?" I yelled. "For crying out loud, get out of here!"

The door closed softly behind her. The elevator hummed; the doors clanged open, then shut. I went over to the window and looked down at the black street below. After a while lights from a parked car sprayed the pavement in a twin pattern. The pattern moved out from the curb, began to glide away, finally disappeared.

I went back to the sofa and the scotch bottle. It seemed to be quite a price for two kisses and a little anti-septic rubbed on my bruises. I looked at the scotch bottle, looked a long time at it. Then I sighed, put it down.

I went back to the window and threw it open and let the night breezes come in. The perfume of her filled the place like incense.

I left the apartment then, went downstairs, went across the now darkened lobby and out to the street. I went over to headquarters.

They were both there. They looked at me, looked at my bruised face. The tall one nodded. "Mr. Barron."

"You make that killer yet?" I asked.
"We work here, Mr. Barron. Remember?"

"Good," I said. I smiled at him. He didn't smile back. I looked at the red-faced one by his side.

"By me she looks beautiful," he said.
I turned back to the tall one. "How did you peg him?"

"The bullet, Mr. Barron. We threw it on the shadowgraph. It agreed with the markings of a bullet we have on file here."

I stared at him. He nodded, reading my mind.

"The killer was a private detective, like yourself. We had bullet characteristics from his gun on file here, as of course we have of your own gun. Of every private operator's gun. Isn't that interesting?"

I thought about that for a long moment.

"By me she looks beautiful," said the red-faced one.

"So you got him?" I asked.

"No, we didn't get him. It seems he moved recently. So we didn't get him — just yet. Would it be asking too much to know why you're so interested in our work?"

"No," I said. "Not too much. I've got a client now. Since the shooting, I mean."

"Ah. A client? It wouldn't be the unidentified woman?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"You said you didn't know who she was."

"That's right. But I didn't say she didn't know who *I* was. She came up to my place a while ago."

HE BLINKED at that. He looked at his watch. He looked back at me. "You mean now?"

"She ate a late supper," I said.

"By me she looks beautiful."

"Feeney, will you *please* shut up!
Who is she?"

"I said she's a client. She wouldn't

want her name used just now. That's why she went to a private man instead of the police."

"Oh. Like that."

"You said *was*," I said. "You said he *was* a detective. But you said you didn't get him."

"Yeah. A dick. Except that some time ago he went on the reefers. And then he did something else that made us revoke his license. Forfeited his bond too."

"In a nice clean town like this?" I said. "What the hell could he do?"

He curled his lip. "You tell him, Feeney."

I looked over at the red-faced man. If he said what I thought he was going to say, I was ready to punch him in the nose.

"He put slugs in the collection plate," he said.

The tall one grinned. He grinned and then he chuckled sourly. "Gets you after a while, doesn't it?" he said.

I took a deep breath. "What was the guy's name?"

"Sanford, Mr. Barron. Good night now, Mr. Barron."

It was crazy. Nothing could be crazier. But the night was as spent as a night can be, and I was weak and tired and couldn't think straight.

I stopped at the phone booth outside of a darkened filling station. I looked up the number of the Oro Del Rey and called it and asked for Suite Seventeen. Flehr answered it after the second ring.

"Barron," I said. "I've got a little something to sell and a little something to buy."

"So, Soldier?"

"The something to sell first," I said. "The killer who burned down the jeweler was an ex-private eye named Sanford. The police can't find him. I'd like to know where he is."

"You said sell, Soldier."

"Look. I'm tired. I thought you might like to know. Somebody else with ideas in that senatorial race we were mentioning."

"Oh, I see. A private detective. Well, that isn't too interesting, I'm afraid."

I didn't answer that. I clutched the phone and listened to a cricket somewhere outside. Finally I said, "Well?"

"Sorry. I don't need that."

"You haven't a damned thing," I growled wearily. "Forget the letter. It's been destroyed."

"Look, Soldier. . . ."

"You look," I said. "I know. I just burned it. In my diary that makes it official."

"Oh?" He was silent for a little while. Then: "A pity you take that attitude, Soldier. You're on the wrong side of the fence. You really are. He isn't worth your bother. Right now Hurd is with a woman in a small apartment down the street from where you live. That's the kind of a man you're working for."

"You're slipping," I said. "He's at a meeting—or probably home by this time."

"Don't weary me, Soldier. You can check. The place is a walkup a block from your own place. Try apartment 4-B. But thanks anyway. Sanford, you said? I might look into it. I just might at that."

He hung up and left me with the dark phone booth and the cricket who didn't realize how late the season was. There was one thing I could do: I could go over there and rap on the door, and when somebody answered I could be a drunk who'd got the wrong door.

And that would be nice and original and would probably get me a flattened nose from the door bouncing off it.

I sighed and drove over on Hobart. I went by the Huntington. I went down a block and parked and walked back. The place was a walkup, all right. Small. There was a tiny vestibule for mailboxes. I checked. 4-B had a woman's name on it. A Miss Rouchelko.

I went back, went outside, went around the side of the building to the tiny autopark in the rear. There were six cars in it, so it didn't take me long. With my penlight I found what I didn't want to find. It was a small business coupe, and the light I played through the left front window showed up plainly the registration hooked around the steering column. The name on the slip wasn't hard to read. It was John Lenson Hurd.

I WENT HOME. All I wanted was to lie down somewhere and forget about waking up again ever. I wanted to forget for a long time about a man with a sharp voice, and two thugs who couldn't live without narcotics and who liked to bash in people's faces. I wanted to forget the fact I hadn't even mentioned this to the police.

I wanted to forget a down-and-out seaman who knew his number would

be coming up on the next turn but had a little decency left anyhow, and did the only thing he could think of in that last hour to protect a woman he had known too well during the war.

I wanted to forget that woman's husband, Senator John Lenson Hurd, who was supposed to be at a late meeting but wasn't. And lastly, I wanted to forget an oversized brooch and a small thin man who killed just to lay his hands on it. It was crazy. I wanted to forget it all.

The phone rang.

I looked at it. I stared stupidly at the thing. I looked at my watch. 4:30. In the morning. I stared back at the phone and listened to it ring. Finally, I went over and picked it up.

"Sleeping, Soldier?"

It was Flehr again. "All night," I said.

"You check on Senator Hurd?"

"Yes."

"You see what I meant, then. I'm efficient, Soldier. I find things out. I get paid for that."

"You're a killer, too. You get paid for that?"

"What was that last?" His voice got sharper.

"Clausen," I said. "The sailor. You hopheads bashed in his face and put a bullet through his heart. They'd have done the same with me, if you hadn't told them to bring me back alive."

"You're tired, Soldier."

"Sure."

"Not my boys. I've warned them before."

"Before?" I looked over at the open window, at the curtain that was com-

ing in quietly on the morning breeze. I looked out at the sky that was still dark, still cold. I said in a voice as dead as it could ever get: "When I get a little rest, it goes to the police. All of it. Good-by."

"Just a minute. You're wrong, of course. But that's neither here nor there. You wanted a favor. I've done that favor, Soldier. I know where the killer is you're looking for."

I didn't put the phone down.

"Seems my boys knew who I meant when I described him."

"Why wouldn't they?" I broke in. "Birds of a feather. He was a hophead too."

"Jokes, Soldier. The boys just got back from a visit with this killer, this Sanford. Had a nice talk with him, they said. He said he didn't take any brooch, didn't kill anybody, didn't do anything."

"He had his halo on," I said. "That makes me blind and deaf and a big fat liar, and the dead jeweler's just pretending."

"I like you, Soldier. I'm telling you this because I like you. You'll find him in a cheap hotel over in Boyle Heights. Room Nine, second floor back. He might just talk to you where he wouldn't with my boys."

"What good is it?"

"Wait. Not through yet. You know what kind of a man you're working for. You checked; you know what kind of a nice senator he is. I wasn't wrong. Five thousand for the letter, Soldier. As high as I can go, and it meets the other offer. Cash, not a check. Well?"

"Sure," I said, "C'mon right up.

You'll find it wrapped up, waiting." I dropped the phone...

I expected Sanford would be beat up. I expected he'd need a friend, even if he was a killer. Knowing the two hopheads as I did, I expected that. Maybe I even expected the other, too; it was right in keeping.

His face was bashed in like Clausen's. They hadn't taken off his coat or his shirt or his undershirt. They'd written the message across a unharmed section of his forehead, and—was the same except for one word: *This guy couldn't shoot straight.*

The .22 was in his thin right hand and the hand hung limply at his side. It seemed funny, unless, of course, they had put it there after. And then I noticed it. A small spot about four inches up from his belt buckle.

I looked around the room. Not much was disturbed but dust. It looked as though he'd moved in recently, perhaps tonight. I tried drawers in the dresser. Nothing. In the closet built into the wall there was a little: a suitcase opened, contents spread on the closet floor. But nothing like a brooch. I wondered.

I turned him over. He had a wallet, a driver's license. It was made out to Sanford. I put it back, turned him over again. I even arranged his right hand at his side again. Then I picked up his left arm to straighten that. It was then that I saw it.

Sticking to his sleeve at about where the little buttons are, it gleamed brightly; a thing that had once served a very important function; a thing made with infinite care but now broken.

It was the tiny steel click spring the jeweler had taken out of my watch.

CHAPTER FIVE

I WENT DOWNSTAIRS. Nobody stopped me. Nobody was there to care. The Arora Hotel was a place where things like this could happen and did happen. Murder had probably been committed there before, and probably would be again.

The sky was gray. I pulled away from the curb.

There was no traffic now, early-morning traffic of the early-morning birds who put in their eight hours and then go home and have a hell of a swell time and go to bed and then get up to do the same thing all over again. A black car with a tan, cut-down Carson top pulled away from the curb down the street, pulled out in front of me. I followed it for a block or two and then it slowed, went into the curb again. I passed it. It pulled out once more, followed me. I didn't care. I was too tired to care and to think.

I stopped before the Huntington and parked right in the middle of the no-parking zone. I got out. I didn't care. The black car with the tan Carson top seemed to be pulling in right behind me, also in the no-parking zone. He probably didn't care either. I went through the lobby to the elevator, let the doors bang shut, punched the button. Then I fell into a corner and didn't care whether it moved or not.

I got out again, went down to my door, went in. I got the scotch bottle and wrapped a tired paw around it. I

struggled it up to my lips and opened my mouth and let gravity do the rest, and I turned around with my back to the sofa so I could fall flat back on it.

That put me in a line with the door just in time to see it opening. Two of them were coming in with their bright cruel smiles and their slave-driving guns.

The one with the horse nostrils came first. His eyes were glittering like brilliants in a piece of cheap costume jewellery. He'd stoked up before he came. You could see it in his eyes, in the way his gun hand was held rigid, in the steps he took as though he were walking on air.

"Where is it, punk? Before you go, where is it?"

The other one came through the door. He didn't bother to close it after him. They were both that set. It had been a long night and they were charged to the eyebrows to greet the brand new dawn.

I swallowed and pointed at the smoke stand. I didn't know what earthly good that would do me except give me maybe one or two instants of reprieve while he let his eyes flick over and see what I meant.

"An accident," I whispered hoarsely. "It caught fire." Maybe they'd think that was humorous. Maybe they'd laugh a little. Maybe that would give me an instant more.

They both looked over. The one with the horse nostrils took one floating step, looked down, poked at the black ash with the forefinger on his left hand. I hadn't counted on his poking with his forefinger. That was swell. That

was a bonus. That gave me an extra added instant.

And then he came back again. He floated over in front of me and brought the gun up. He placed it lightly against my nose and wagged it like a golfer putting his driver down close to the tee'd ball just before he winds up and drives it three hundred yards.

My eyes were shrieking. I was looking around the gun, around the hand that held the gun. I was staring with all the fixed intensity of a hypnotized hummingbird looking at the future down the deep, dark mouth of a snake. I was staring across the room to the doorway; and beyond the doorway at the surprised look on the face of Lieutenant Feeney out in the hall.

"What is it with him?" I croaked.

The gun lifted from my nose. The hand of the man with the horse nostrils brought up the gun in an arc above his head. He was going to do this right. He wasn't going to miss this time. He was going to slash that front sight down my face from my widow's peak to the cleft in my chin.

Lieutenant Feeney's gun roared.

A blessed sound. The hand above my head came down, suddenly limp. I brought up my right knee and got him with it in the stomach. Then I brought up the scotch bottle—I had held on to it like a statue all that time—and I smashed it over the top of his head. He went down.

The other wasn't standing still just watching me do things. He was turning even as Horse Nostrils jerked from the impact of Feeney's bullet. He was winging around on those floating feet

of his, and his gun hand was coming up in a swoop.

Feeney's gun roared again. It didn't stop him. It got him somewhere in the right side, for he suddenly changed hands on the gun, but it didn't stop him. His feet made a little slipping, dancing movement under him, and his left hand moved like a yo-yo flipping out and up. His gun didn't make as much noise as Feeney's had. It was a smaller caliber.

It blasted out again. And again. Feeney stood in the doorway, and a wide-awake look came into his eyes. He couldn't believe it. It was happening to him with the rapidity of a sewing machine banging out stitches, and he couldn't believe it.

He went down on one knee. His left hand met the floor palm first. He braced himself with it. Then he went down on his elbow, slowly, against all his will. Before it was too late he realized. He steadied his gun hand—it wasn't wavering too much—and he pumped his four remaining slugs into the hophead. There was a big pleased grin on his face as each one of them hit.

It was quiet after that. Anything would be quiet, even a bass drum booming in the next room. The hallway outside was filling with people who weren't used to this kind of an alarm clock, but even their yells were sounds in a vacuum. I went over to Feeney and leaned down over him.

"You saved me, guy," I said. "You're my pappy and my mammy from here out and I'll take care of you in your old age, so help me Hannah."

He opened his eyes. The grin was still on his mouth. He moved his lips. He wanted to say something.

I leaned down farther. "Name it, boy," I said.

"Give that man a chocolate cigar," he whispered.

THE NEW day was in its sixth hour and the sun outside was hot again. I had spent the last three of those six hours on a hard chair in Herman's office at Homicide. I was as spent as anyone could be and still live to think about it.

I looked down at my hands for the hundredth time. I was alone; Herman had gone outside somewhere. I was too tired to be surprised that he hadn't handcuffed me to the chair.

The door opened and he came back. He was shaking his head and making noises down in his throat.

"The guy'll live, they say. How the hell you like that? I can't even get rid of him when somebody pumps slugs into him. Him and his fixations."

I didn't say anything to that. I didn't have the strength.

"The way you tell it," he said, "somebody hired this guy Flehr to put the smear on State Senator Hurd. He found out about the doll and this sailor during the war and tried to buy the guy out. The sailor agreed, then went back on it either because he'd got a better price from the doll or else his conscience began acting up."

I nodded.

"So Flehr's iron men do some plastic work on his face with a gun. He's dead. You get the letter, burn it."

I nodded.

"The lab's working on that ash. There isn't much; somebody bruised the thing. All right. You give Flehr the killer's description, his name. You do this because you figure with his inside dope he'll know who it is. You want the brooch back for the dame. They know him. They get the brooch. Right?" They knock him off too."

I shrugged. "I suppose. What else?"

"They come to your dive last of all for the letter because you'd tipped Flehr you had it. Feeney comes on stage and that's that."

"Yeah," I said. "That was pretty good of him getting there just at that one particular time."

Herman snorted. He scratched a kitchen match on a big thumbnail, held it to a half-smoked cigarette. "You were too cagey, boy. You came bustin' in just before dawn wanting to know did we make that killer yet. You think we were just gonna say good night, Mr. Barron; sweet dreams, Mr. Barron? Cripes. From the minute you stepped out of here we were on you."

I gawked.

"Yeah. Pretty good, Feeney and me. We found Sanford. We'd followed you there. Went up after you came down. Room nine has the door open, and there was Sanford laying out, waiting. I stayed. Feeney went down again, followed you across town."

"All right," I said. "All right. What is it with me now?"

"We didn't catch this guy Flehr, though," he said. "He lit out fast. Guy must have electronic ears or something. We'll have a little something to do for

the rest of the day now. We'll get him."

"Sure," I said. "What about me, though? I haven't slept all night. I haven't had any lunch. Nor any breakfast."

"Oh. Oh yeah. One of the D.A.'s men's in with the D.A. now. That'll take a little time, considering who this Senator Hurd is. Some of it's got to the papers. I don't know how much."

"Lord."

"Yeah. I suppose you could powder off home. Be back here by seven."

All because of a letter. A small piece of paper with handwritten words on it. A tiny bit in a larger framework of events. A click spring in the works of a handful of men in a city of three million. And because of it—like the broken click spring in Uncle Alf's watch—there was trouble.

I pulled the bed out of the wall and fell across it and stayed there for an hour and a half. I couldn't sleep. I doubted if I could ever sleep again. Finally I got up and went to the phone and called her.

"Barron," I said.

"Edward! Where have you been? I've called and called. I was worried sick."

"Sure, baby," I said. "Went out for a short beer that's all. Hubby get home okay?"

"No. He called. It seems he had to attend a conference in Sacramento this morning early. He flew up there some time last night."

"I bet," I said. "Busy guys these senators. Look. Did this Clausen guy contact you personally or did you get a de-

mand in the mail with his address?"

"Yes, Edward. In the mail, I mean. Why? Do you have my brooch?"

"I thought so. Where is it now? The demand?"

"I don't know. I put it in the desk. It's probably still there. . . ."

"Oh, sure. Never mind. The killer's dead. I thought you'd like to know. He was what you might call an unfrocked private eye but he had a habit of practicing anyhow. . . . No, I didn't get your brooch. It might not be a bad idea to ask your husband for it when he gets home."

"My *husband*?"

"Yeah. You shouldn't leave demands lying loose around the house. Suppose he found it? Suppose he got the shakes, what with election just around the corner and all? He might even hire a private eye to have you followed, see what you're into. Just for the ducks of it, let's say this private eye is a thin, small man named Sanford who rattles easily. He rattles so easily he shoots a jeweler; and then when he's wrapping his brain around what he's done, he gets the horrible greasy picture and snatches the brooch, figuring it'll keep his client out because certainly the client's own wife won't peep to the police. Get it?"

"What—?"

"I know," I said. "It's crazy, isn't it? That goes to show you how tired I am. I haven't had any sleep. But, anyhow, suppose he slips your husband the brooch and tells him what happened and demands hide-away money. Get it? Your husband forks over fast, for now it's worse than before."

"What? I don't understand a word of what you're saying."

I grinned. "Neither do I. It must be the heat."

IT CAME out—part of it at least. Hurd's name was linked with Flehr and the two dead hopheads. Strangely, they didn't get a word about the brooch.

When election day rolled around, despite his previous record in the Senate, Hurd went down like a ship without any bottom in it. That's how we do with our representatives.

I had a rough time with the law. But there really wasn't anything they had against me except not reporting the two homicides. The D.A. did it nicely. Called me Mr. Barron each time he opened his mouth. Warned me not to ever do it again. He and the good senator belong to the same party. And that was that.

I mailed her a bill but that was all. And then, a week after election, the door opened and in she came. She leaned back against the door and closed it again the way she always did. She came in with her nice soft blondish hair and her nice clothes and her bare legs and all.

She came over to the sofa. She looked at my outstretched legs. I pulled them down, and she wiggled out of the little breezy cape and shivered although the night was warm, and she sat down beside me.

"You were right about the brooch, Edward," she said.

"Oh," I said. "I wondered. They didn't catch Flehr, you know."

"Yes. You're very clever, Edward.

"True," I admitted.

"You haven't come to see me. You haven't even called me."

"True again," I said. "You've got a husband, remember?"

She shook her head. "It seems not anymore. It seems I'm to go up to Reno for awhile. It seems I'm no good for his new career, Edward."

I clucked sympathetically. "He's a bear on careers," I said.

"Edward?"

She looked at me. Her eyes were little question marks waiting to be put down some place. "I said I'm going to Reno. Doesn't that mean anything, dear?"

"Sure. You're getting a divorce. You'll be gone six weeks."

"Yes, dear."

What a gal. If the day were seventy-eight centuries long, I'd never see another like her. I put my arms around her and pulled her close to be kissed.

"Darling, darling!" she whispered.

"Sure, baby," I said.

"I'll write to you every night. It won't be long, you'll see. In no time I'll be back, dear. Wait for me; it won't be long."

"Sure, baby," I said.

Sure baby. It was nice to think about, something nice to have in your memory on cold lonely nights. Something to look forward to and catch a breath over if you're so inclined.

Except that Reno's quite a way off, and they've got bright lights up there and nice guys with overloaded pockets and convertibles and everything. And six weeks is such a hell of a long, long time.

♦♦♦

Rare among detective writers is the author who can be mystifying and moving at the same time. Unfortunately, the ability to create a perfect plot doesn't often go with deep insight into human character. It is with all the more pleasure, therefore, that we present the following story from Robert C. Dennis' deft pen. Read it for its human drama, its taut suspense. We'll stake our last blue pencil that it will cling in your memory for many moons to come.

I Thee Kill

by ROBERT C. DENNIS

I KNEW THERE was only one way to get through that morning. Just not wake up until it was all over and done with. That used to work for me when I was a kid back in Michigan. If I could stay asleep long enough—not dreaming, not sufficiently conscious to think—the mysterious alchemy of healing would begin. When I awoke it would be afternoon and the pain inside wouldn't be so bitter and I'd be able to breathe. . . .

And so a mouse in the walls woke me up.

I lay there in the ghastly light of a rainy morning and the pain woke up with me. Maybe it was funny, I couldn't tell. Here it was the last day of the world, my thinking stripped down to ultimate terms like life and death and the futility of it all, and that damned soulless little beast was rattling around in the walls.

Moliere or Sartre might have made something of it. But I was merely John

Alan Daly, high school English teacher.

I sat up wearily and waited for the dregs of last night's Spanish lesson to crawl out of my subconscious. I'd gone to sleep with my audiophone under my pillow—I'd been toying with a half-baked notion of running away to Mexico as soon as I'd learned the language—and always before some of the liquid foreign words whispered into my ear all through the night were right on top of my mind when I awoke. But this morning there was only one word there. It was in my brain and in my mouth, and I rolled it over my tongue audibly.

Sheilah . . . Sheilah . . . Sheilah. . . .

Outside the early traffic splashed through the wet streets. Happy is the bride the sun shines on. What happens to brides in the rain? A baby in a neighboring apartment was expressing some unnamed sorrow. In a little while it would feel better for it. And the mouse gnawed away on my nerves.

Sheilah . . . Sheilah. . . .

I stumbled out into the kitchen and found a trap under the sink. Whatever happened, I would murder the mouse that had murdered sleep for me.

As I passed the living room my eye caught something white slipped under the outer door. An envelope with John Daly typed across the face, no address, no stamp. It didn't mean anything to me. Even when I found a second envelope inside, this one thick and creamy, my stunned and empty mind didn't make anything out of it. There was a card inside:

*Mr. and Mrs. Graham Sterling
request the honor of your presence
at the marriage of their daughter
Sheilah Ruth*

to

*Anthony Roy Farrant
Saturday, April. . . .*

I sat down as if I'd been hit below the belt. The invitation fluttered to the carpet. I didn't have the strength to tear it up. I thought, *dirty . . . dirty . . . like kicking a cripple, Sheilah!*

It had been four months since I'd seen her. She hadn't said good-by, nor called it off; nothing. She simply was never around any longer, never home to my phone calls. Even my registered letter had gone unanswered. Then the papers carried the announcement of her wedding and there was nothing left to do but pick up the pieces. And now, three hours before the ceremony, an invitation, like an afterthought for a poor relative. Or a jilted lover. . . .

How could you do it, Sheilah?

After a while I carried the mouse-trap into the bedroom. In the closet at the baseboard was an opening into the water pipes, a square board loosely nailed in place for the convenience of the plumber. I put the trap in there.

I suppose it was a form of compensation. Killing that mouse, I mean. I wanted to kill something or somebody. Sometimes there's no other way to ease a racking pain. There are some things you can run away from, and some you can fight, and others you can free yourself from only when you kill. In my secret mind I suppose I wanted to murder Sheilah for what she'd done to me; or better Anthony Farrant, who was just a name anyway. That's what I wanted to do. Instead I was setting a trap in cold blood for a harmless mouse.

John Alan Daly, killer. . . .

I made myself some coffee and then I started to reason. Rationalize was perhaps the better word. I told myself Sheilah wasn't capable of such cruelty. In the back of my brain I realized I didn't know what she might be capable of doing, but I wouldn't think of that. I told myself she'd sent the invitation for a purpose. There was some hidden significance there. For one reason or another she hadn't been able to write or call, but she wanted me to be at the wedding.

That was it. She wanted me to stand by.

I began to feel faintly better then, like Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*. When you have to lose your love, it's infinitely easier if you can feel noble and self-sacrificing. It becomes unbearable only when you get shunted aside and

forgotten. As I left the apartment I even had a momentary qualm about the mouse. I wasn't homicidal any longer.

If I'd had more time I'd have gone back and removed the trap.

Sometimes I wake up in the night in a cold sweat of terror, thinking about that. In my dreams I live the whole thing all over again, only this time I spring the trap before I leave and the whole hideous affair rushes on to the frightful ending that was planned for me.

Those are the times when it's far better to wake up to reality.

All the way over on the street car I told myself I'd just slip quietly into the church and sit on the aisle where Sheilah would see me. Maybe my presence would give her comfort. I was dramatizing but it was either that or go to pieces.

But I couldn't do it. I stood in the rain across the street from the church and I couldn't bring myself to go in. Cars splattered up to the curb and wedding guests ducked under umbrellas and ran up the steps and through the big double doors. The rain fell mournfully on me and I got wet and cold, but I couldn't move.

It seemed incredible that at twenty-nine with three years of combat service behind me, a man of education and some experience, I still couldn't walk into that church for Sheilah's wedding. If hell opened up for me I couldn't do it. It was a quixotic notion to have come at all. Sheilah needed me there the way I'd needed that mouse.

Sydney Carton had gone to the guillotine but he didn't watch the woman

he loved marry another man. And neither would I.

I turned and walked away.

HALF A BLOCK down I came to a small tavern. I went in and hunched over a drink. I tried not to think about it. But I remembered I'd met Sheilah in that bar just around the corner from my school. I couldn't remember who had introduced us but I remembered that it had rained on the day of our first real date. I remembered I'd once gone to early mass with her though it wasn't my church. And I remembered a thousand other memories crammed into a half year of knowing her and I tried to get drunk and I couldn't even do that.

A short half block away Anthony Roy Farrant would be fidgeting at the altar, waiting. . . .

A heavy arm draped itself around my neck and an alcoholic breath blew in my ear. "Hiya, Malcolm, ol' boy. Whatcha doing here?"

"You've made a mistake, friend." I didn't even turn around. "The name isn't Malcolm."

"Whassa matter, Malcolm?" the voice chided. "Getting too good for your ol' friends? Le's have a drink, Malcolm. For ol' time's sake. Remember ol' times? The convention in Frisco? Howsa 'bout that, Malcolm?"

He was just a lush; there's one in every barroom. They've met you somewhere, San Francisco or Des Moines or Chicago. They want to buy you a drink for old time's sakes, or just to show you there's no hard feelings. The only way to get rid of them is to have a drink and then take a walk to the men's room.

"Barman," he bawled, "a drink for my ol' friend Malcolm."

I should have let it go at that. Ordinarily I'm the mild kind of guy who doesn't like to hurt anyone's feelings, even a lush's. But today was different. Today I wanted to kill little mice and insult barflies.

"Beat it!" I said in a low voice.

"Don't be that way, Malcolm."

Down the street Sheilah would be walking slowly up the aisle. And here I was occupied by one of the silly little irritations of every day life. I lost all restraint.

"I'm not Malcolm, you damned stew," I shouted. "My name is John Alan Daly and I never met you in Frisco or any place else. Now get the hell away from me!"

The barman came hurriedly down to us. He reached across the bar to the drunk. "You'd better walk it off, friend. You've had your quota."

"Okay," the drunk said in a sad, dignified voice. "If thassa way you feel, Malcolm." The arm dropped from my neck. I heard steps going away almost sorrowfully.

"Sorry, Mr. Daly," the barman said.

He gave me a sympathetic smile and I felt like a heel. I'd been guilty of taking out my feelings on another person. I turned on my stool and looked after him but he already was going out the door. A nameless little drunk I'd cursed. I ordered another drink but it didn't help.

Anthony Roy Farrant would be kissing his bride now. I had never heard of him before I read his name in the paper. I hadn't known any of Sheilah's

friends. She'd always met me somewhere so that I had never even seen her parents. Funny how little I really did know about her. It didn't matter much now. Mrs. Anthony Roy Farrant and I simply didn't move in the same circles.

I was getting maudlin with sentimentality. I paid for my drinks and walked outside and back toward the church. The cross on the steeple looked high and lonesome against the somber sky, and April rain sliced down the gray stone walls. I'd misjudged the time and the guests were huddled under their umbrellas waiting for the happy couple to come down the broad steps. I began to hurry. For the same illogical reason that you can never leave things alone that hurt, I wanted one last look at Sheilah. A form of masochism, I suppose.

There'd been a full church from the looks of the crowd. Maybe the Sternlings hadn't known till the last moment whether there would be an invitation left for me. I was all over the idea now that Sheilah had sent it as a call for aid and comfort. I stopped on the curb on the opposite side of the street, watching the wedding guests getting ready to throw wet rice and confetti.

The cars of the wedding procession were between me and the happy couple so there was no danger of Sheilah noticing me. They paused momentarily in the frame of the double-doors and somebody handed Farrant an umbrella. He was a slender, elegant-looking man with a smile that flashed even in the grayness of the day, but that was all I saw of him. I was looking at Sheilah.

She wore a pale blue suit, beautifully tailored. A blue hat with a little fringe

of flowers sat on her coal-black hair. Obviously she hadn't calculated on its raining, but she had a tweed coat draped over her shoulders. Even at a distance I could see that she was unbelievably lovely—maybe because it had been four months without the sight of her. Or perhaps because all brides are beautiful.

Somebody shouted and threw a handful of rice, and Sheilah laughed and ducked her head and together she and Farrant ran down the steps. Farrant held the umbrella so that she had most of it and when he stopped abruptly Sheilah's momentum carried her a good eight feet ahead. The rain falling on the flowered hat told her Farrant hadn't kept up. Instinctively she put up a hand to protect it, turning back as she did.

Farrant was still standing a few feet down from the bottom step. There was a stunned expression on his handsome face. He seemed to be trying to say something but I don't think any words got out. Then he let the umbrella fall at his feet and sprawled right on top of it.

I had the unreal sense of watching a scene in a movie. But in a movie Farrant would have gone down dramatically and with a semblance of gracefulness. This wasn't quite either of those. The noise of the crowd had died away too, and there was no heavy background music. There was just Farrant grotesquely sprawled on top of the umbrella on the wet sidewalk and the after-echo of a backfire ringing in my ears.

I couldn't see Sheilah's face. She was still looking back. The umbrellas surged in from both sides and then I couldn't

see her at all. I thought: *What happens to brides on rainy days?*

I had at least one answer: They became widows. I'd seen enough men go down from a bullet in the chest to know this much: Anthony Roy Farrant was dead. . . .

I WALKED ALL the way home, nearly four miles, through the rain. It didn't matter that I got wet. What frightened me was that I couldn't think. I knew that in that crowd of a hundred or more guests any one of a dozen people might have shot Farrant under cover of an umbrella. But there was a kind of deadly purpose to it that my slugged mind refused to grasp. I sat in a big chair, dripping water on my carpet, and drank whiskey left over from Christmas and still I couldn't think.

I thought about taking off my wet clothes. I thought that I would get up and walk into the bedroom and get a dry robe from the clothes closet. While I was at it I'd look in the wall to see if the trap had caught that mouse. I thought about those things for nearly an hour before I got up finally and did it.

When I put a cautious hand in the opening, it struck me that a fitting climax would be to get my finger caught in the trap. My hand brushed a piece of metal that moved. A wrench left behind by a careless plumber, I thought, and I took hold of it and pulled it out.

It wasn't a wrench; it was a thirty-eight automatic pistol.

I rocked back on my heels and frowned. It hadn't been there when I set the trap. I was certain of that. Somebody must have been in my apartment

while I was out. But why? And why hide a gun here? As obvious as the answers were, my brain simply didn't comprehend.

I had to feed it to myself a bite at a time. A man had been murdered, shot. With a thirty-eight automatic, as likely as not. Ergo this was the murder gun, cached here by the killer.

That much was fine. Major premise, minor premise, conclusion. Continue, please.

Very well. The dead man was my rival—successful—for Sheila. I had been skulking around the scene of the crime. Ergo I had hidden the gun.

I didn't like that so well. A very logical analysis of the problem but it produced one more ergo.

Ergo I killed Anthony Farrant.

There it was and I stared at it in fascination and disbelief. But it was inescapable. I had just proved it. If I could prove it to myself, then any backward law student could prove it to a court. In all the world there were just two people who knew differently: myself and the murderer.

I started to think then. The invitation had been sent to lure me on to the scene. But wait. I hadn't gone into the church and no one had seen me who would know me either by sight or name. . . .

Except the bartender.

Now you're beginning to get it, Reason said. That incident with the drunk would fix me in his mind. What did that drunk—and just how drunk was he—look like? Short and chubby. I never saw his face. Maybe I should have.

I put the gun in the slit pocket of my top coat and went back out to the living

room. I'd get rid of that in a hurry. What a blessing in disguise that mouse had been. I shuddered a little just thinking how close it *could* have been.

Then I stopped. How does one get rid of a gun? You can't just throw it out with the garbage. Down a drain? Okay, if not near here. The police would search the area for the gun and it mustn't be found even near me. In the harbor? But that meant carrying it through the streets in my pocket.

I shivered. All at once I could hear the police coming up the stairs. I went over to the window and peered out. No police cars down in the street.

I ran to the back door of my apartment and looked out. The corridor was shadowy and empty. I made it to the elevator. I went right down to the basement and into the underground garage. From there I could get out into the alley behind the building.

And all the time I was doing these things I knew it was wrong. But when panic is riding you, you're a different person. I found that out. I ran down the alley, then slowed to a walk. Five blocks later I caught a street car.

Everybody on the car looked up at me suspiciously. The gun in my pocket made a bulge like a watermelon. . . .

Then I took a grip on my skittering nerves. There was nothing to be gained by acting like a criminal. I took a second glance at the other passengers. Nobody was even looking at me. I'm all right, I thought. Just have to think clearly. First get rid of the gun. Then call Sheilah. She'd know who Farrant's enemies were.

Again a loophole in my reasoning

pulled me up. I hadn't laid eyes on Farrant before today. His enemies, or even friends, were strangers to me, and to them I didn't exist. The only person in this situation who knew that there was such a person as John Alan Daly was Sheilah. It was getting more fantastic by the moment.

I GOT OFF the street car and phoned Sheilah's house from a drugstore. A man answered; a strange voice, not one that had turned back my other calls to Sheilah. I asked for Miss Sterling; she hadn't been Mrs. Farrant long enough to count.

"Miss Sterling is ill," the voice said carefully. "Unless it is important, I'd rather not disturb her."

"It's—it is important."

"Who will I tell her is calling?" Very casual but sly, like a cop.

"Just say a friend." The trapped feeling was back. The phone booth was squeezing the breath out of me. My face burned from the rush of blood to my head.

"Just hang on," the voice said. "I'll call her."

I heard the phone being laid down and I hung up quietly. It was a cop all right, no doubt about that. They were stalling me in order to trace the call. I got out of the phone booth and ran for a bus and barely made it. I felt like chortling with satisfaction, just like any criminal who outwits his pursuers.

Now what? The tavern where I'd encountered the drunk. Was that dangerous? Maybe the police had already been in there. They might even have someone staked out. Have to chance it, I

decided. Aimless flight would get me nothing. The barman must have seen the chubby little drunk over my shoulder. If he remembered me, he'd remember the drunk. He might even know his name. Back to the tavern, I thought almost gaily.

I was so light-headed I almost walked into the bar with the gun in my pocket. That would never do, I thought reprovingly. I wondered if all the liquor I'd drunk was finally taking effect.

On the corner was an aluminum trash container much like a mail box, with hinged flaps. I put the gun in there. There were enough scraps of paper to cover it up. The street cleaners wouldn't be working in the rain, and who else ever looks in a trash can? I let out a long breath of relief.

I went into the tavern and ordered a drink from the same barman. He remembered me just fine. With the drunk he was vague.

"You remember him leaning on me?" I persisted.

"Oh sure, Mr. Daly." I winced when he used my name; I used to be flattered when a bartender remembered it. "But I didn't pay any attention to him. At least not enough to place him."

"Wasn't he a regular patron?"

"No. Never saw him before. He was tipsy when he came in here." He was only passingly interested in my problem but some instinct that I'd never called upon before warned me to get out of there. I left my drink untouched.

I went outside. Then I understood. Sirens, very close and coming closer, were whining ominously in the dying afternoon. They couldn't be coming for

me. How did they know? No one had seen me, I was sure of that. And the barman certainly hadn't yet had time to place a call.

But just as certainly, an alarm had been turned in and they *were* coming for me. I didn't have any doubts now. The real murderer possibly, acting with super-intelligence or an uncanny understanding of the way I thought and reacted, had arranged it.

The sirens were all around me. They had the area cut off and they were closing the circle.

I didn't have time to go back for the gun. I had to get off the streets and there was only one place to go. It was grim irony that only a few hours ago Sheilah had been married here and now it was the only refuge left to me. Two other people were going up the steps and they paused, holding the door for me. I nodded my thanks and pushed on past them into the dim stillness of the church.

I knelt in a pew as far as possible from the door and I said a prayer, a very fervent one. I knew how a mouse in a trap felt. Somebody had set one for me, and now he was springing it and there was nothing I could do but wait. The police would be in here soon. If they didn't think of it themselves *he* would.

THE OTHER two people had gone down front and out of sight. I knew from the times I'd gone with Sheilah that they were in a confessional. There was no other place for me to go. In any case I needed help, someone to talk to, and a priest was by all odds the best possible

person I could unburden to right then.

I didn't know the procedure. I hoped I wouldn't be misunderstood or thought sacrilegious. A sign on the door read Father Cronkite. I went into a tiny closet and a grilled window opened but I couldn't see anybody.

"Father," I whispered, "I'm in trouble. Very serious trouble. I need help."

That wasn't the way to do it. The priest's voice seemed a little puzzled. "I will hear your confession—"

"No. I didn't come here to confess. It's worse than that. Much worse. The police are after me. But I'm innocent of any crime."

There was silence from behind the grill. Then, "It might be better to go to the police. If you're innocent—"

"I'm being framed," I whispered. "You won't give me away, will you, Father?" I found myself being crafty. "You couldn't inform on me anyway, Father. It's against the laws of the church to divulge anything told in a confessional."

"That is so," the voice was quiet. "Even though you are taking advantage of that. What is the crime you are wanted for?"

"The murder today—Farrant. I was a friend of Sheilah Sterling. I've got to talk to her. She'll know who is framing me. I've got to get to see her. You can help me."

"I performed the marriage ceremony," the priest said. "I've known Sheilah for a long time. I should not want any harm to come to her."

There was the taste of brass in my mouth. "You won't help me?"

"That is not a fair request. I talked

to the police. They aren't positive that shot wasn't meant for Sheilah. How can I take the risk to bring her to you, a stranger? I suggest you go to the police."

"I *can't* go to them." I had to fight to keep my voice down. "I tell you I'm being framed. Until I can prove that they would laugh at me. You don't understand how fiendishly clever this murderer is, Father." Only the imponderable of that little mouse kept me from being in jail right now. "He's thought of everything."

"I can't help you," the priest said. "I can't of course turn you in, but there's nothing I can do for you. Except advise you—"

I didn't answer. I walked out of the confessional. He was quite right. Even if I had been less incoherent in telling him my predicament, it wouldn't have sounded even slightly convincing. My request had been unreasonable. Nobody was going to help me. I had to do it all alone.

I had no idea how. The only advantage, if it could be called that, was the gun. The faceless little killer didn't know I'd found it. If I could get it and get away from here, perhaps I could evolve a plan. If enough time had elapsed for the police to have given up the search, I had a chance. I had to go outside in any case.

As I neared the front door I saw an umbrella leaning against the wall. Just the thing. It would give me a little cover. There was no one in the vestibule to see me steal it. I went down the steps facing into the rain, the umbrella up before me.

I couldn't see enough of the street to see if any prowlers were there. I just kept walking, afraid to look. I knew where the trash can was. I kept moving steadily forward, my head down, waiting for a voice to stop me, or a heavy hand. I almost ran full into the trash can. I stopped beside it, trying to act indecisive about which way to turn. A quick glance around didn't reveal any white cars, any cops. I elbowed the hinged flap open and reached for the gun.

It wasn't there.

The little scraps of paper were there, and nothing else. I put my head into the box to make sure. The gun was gone.

The police? No, I thought. If they hadn't searched the area at noon, there was no reason to do so now. Some casual passerby? I wanted to think that but I couldn't. It wasn't logical. That left—the killer.

But how, I thought frantically, how did he know this or the other things? He must be reading my mind! If he was, he was confused now. He couldn't tell what I was going to do next. I couldn't even guess that.

I adjusted the umbrella and then I saw the hole in the cloth. It had been on the side back of my head before. It was a neat round charred hole, something like a cigarette burn, but it wasn't that. It was a bullet hole.

This was the umbrella the killer had fired through to kill Anthony Farrant.

I was rid of the gun. The umbrella in my possession would pin the murderer on me. I rammed it into the trash box as if it were burning my hands.

I felt helpless as a child. This man, this chubby little man without name or face or personality, was playing cat-and-mouse with me. Matching wits against him was ridiculous.

I started to run. I was running from fear; sheer panic. I didn't stop to reason that running would attract more attention to me than anything. I didn't know where I was going. I simply ran because there was nothing left to do but run. . . .

MAYBE a man running through the streets on a night like this wasn't so odd. Maybe everybody else out in the rain was too wet and uncomfortable to care. Nobody stopped me; nobody had the slightest interest in me.

I don't know how far I ran, a dozen blocks at least. When I slowed down, with my lungs exploding and weakness cramping my legs, I made a discovery. I'd outrun my panic; I'd left fear behind temporarily. The adrenalin pumped into my system, the accelerated beating of my heart, had stimulated my brain. I was thinking more clearly than at any time today. I knew this much. I had to throw him off.

So far he had foreseen every move, every act, every thought of mine. Leaving out clairvoyance, it could only mean that I'd been reacting in a groove. By the application of simple psychology it had been possible for him to guess my every move. Now I had to do something he could not possibly anticipate.

There in a shallow black doorway, with the rain falling drearily like tears for Sheilah's loss, I planned and devised with the narrow cunning of the hunted

criminal. I could go to the police. Hopeless. Too many things pointed toward me as the killer; there were too many witnesses. The barman, the two people who had held the door for me at the church, even the priest. If he couldn't divulge what I'd said to him in the confessional, there was nothing to prevent him from reporting my presence on the scene.

Get out of town? Impossible without sufficient cash and maybe even then. For certainly the bus depots, railroad stations, and the airport would be under surveillance.

Then I had to hide, at least till morning. With a friend? But which one? There were the Sims; they would help me. But suppose *he* knew about them? He might be sitting in a parked car right now in front of the Sims' house waiting for me to come. If so, the police would be on their way five minutes after I walked into the house.

Then where could I hide?

The fear started to come back and suddenly I'd had enough. All at once I didn't care any longer. The hell with him, with all of them! I'd go home. I'd sneak in through the underground garage just the way I had left. Nobody would expect that. I had a gun there, a war souvenir. If they wanted me, they could shoot me out.

Now I was crafty and full of petty confidence, and in a detached impersonal way I looked at myself and I didn't know me. I was no longer John Alan Daly, high school English teacher. I was a cornered animal.

I went home. But first I phoned my apartment from a service station. Just

to see if there was anyone there, waiting for me. Nobody answered. So I skulked along the alley and down the ramp and into the garage. I took the elevator up one floor above mine. Then I walked down one flight and unlocked my back door and I was home, as simply as that.

I stood in the kitchen and listened to the jungle beat of my own heart in the black silence. I didn't dare risk a light. I took off my sodden topcoat and my hat and let them drop to the floor. Then I felt my way into the bedroom and flung myself on the bed.

I knew that quite possibly the murder gun was back in my apartment again. That was the chief piece of evidence against me. It had to be in my possession or nearby for an iron-clad case. In a moment I'd get up and search the place. Confidence born of my escape became a feeling of triumph. Now I was anticipating him. . . .

"John Alan Daly," a voice said softly, right there in the apartment, in that very room, perhaps even inside my head. "You are a stupid man, John Alan Daly."

I didn't breath, I didn't move, I was incapable of moving.

"Did you really believe you could fool me with so simple a ruse as this? Don't you understand, John Alan Daly? Even yet are you incapable of realizing that you can't escape me? You are not only stupid, Daly, you are childish!"

It was a quiet voice, hardly more than a whisper; without timbre or individuality; a taunting, *mad* voice.

"You turned out to be such a disappointment, Daly," the voice mocked. "When you found the gun I had hopes

you would be a worthy adversary. It must have been a stroke of luck."

I moved my head slowly from side to side searching the dark with my eyes but I couldn't see him. I couldn't even *feel* his presence. But that voice, that sardonic, flaying, insane voice was still there inside my own head and I thought, *Maybe it's me. I'm crazy. There never was a faceless killer. That was a trick of mind. I killed Farrant.*

I think then I started to cry.

"I didn't expect you to think about the little drunk in the bar so quickly. But finding the gun started you remembering, didn't it, Daly? How clever you thought you were, going back to ask about the drunk. I had hopes for you until you panicked. You ran like a rabbit, Daly!"

A low, demented laugh that would haunt me forever rattled in my skull. "Give yourself up, Daly. Go to the police and confess that you killed Farrant. You did, you know. You shot him through that umbrella, the one you threw into the trash can. Get up, John Alan Daly. Call the police to come for you. . . ."

I GOT UP. Whatever had once existed of the personality and will-power and ego of John Alan Daly had disintegrated. I was a zombie. I actually got up to go to the phone and call the police.

When I did the voice slid out of my head and came to me softly from a little distance like a quiet hum. And reason came back with a rush. I dropped on my knees and fumbled under the bed.

It was the audiophone, of course. He'd recorded his voice and tied a piece of string from the switch to the bedsprings. My weight on the bed had started the tape-recorder.

I held my cigarette lighter down and stared at it and then I started to laugh and for a moment my laugh was as maniacal as his. Then I got a grip on myself. I had to. Because I had him now. He'd slipped, finally. His warped ego had betrayed him.

Framing me for Farrant's death hadn't been enough. He'd needed to gloat over me and in doing so he became a person, not something dredged up from the black horror of my fear-crazed mind.

He was still faceless, but he had a voice. And if that voice existed for me, it would exist for the police.

Feverishly I crawled across the rug to the telephone. By the glow of my lighter I found the number in the phone book. If I could reach Sheilah she would recognize the voice. I dialled Father Cronkite.

I told him the story. I was calm now and coherent, and I had something concrete—the wire recording. I played that for him through the phone.

His voice was troubled when he answered. "I don't know. This is a terrible decision to make. I haven't any proof that this isn't just a trick to lure Sheilah to her death. You could have made that recording yourself."

"Call her," I urged. "Tell everything I've told you. Let her decide."

There was a prolonged silence as though he might be saying a prayer, and then he said, "Hang up. And stay

by your phone until you get a call."

I sat there on the floor in my wet clothes and I went back and reconstructed the events and they were no longer overpowering. He had known that if I guessed any of it, it would start with his drunk act. So he had been waiting, probably in a parked car, for me to return to the tavern. He had seen me hide the gun, and had stolen it. Picking up his umbrella was pure chance; he'd ditched it in the church right after the shooting. Then he had come back here to plant the gun again and he'd found my audiophone. His ego had done the rest.

The arm holding the phone had gone to sleep before the call came. It was Sheilah. "Johnny?" she said, and even under the circumstances her voice could still make my pulse beat. "What is it, Johnny? Do you know who killed Roy? Father Cronkite . . ."

"Listen," I said. "Tell me if you recognize this voice." I put the audiophone against the receiver.

She listened to the end. "I think it's —" She broke off. "I'd want to hear it again, not over the phone, before I say."

"Will you come here, Sheilah? The police think I killed your husband. Are you afraid to come?"

"No, I'm not afraid, Johnny," she said quietly. "Not of you. I can be there in an hour."

I told her to come through the alley. It wasn't yet time for the police. Not until I knew his identity and could be assured that the police would work that line of investigation too. It would have been too easy for them to accept the

mass of evidence against me at face value and shrug off a mad killer, despite the recorder. They could say I'd done that myself. Having Sheilah believe in me wasn't enough.

She got there in less than an hour. I let her into the kitchen and I almost took her in my arms before I remembered. She was a bride and a widow.

"Hello, Johnny," she said in her gentle, sad voice. I recalled with a start that the sadness had always been there from the first day I'd known her.

I didn't ask her why it happened the way it had. I took her into the bedroom and let her listen to the recording. The first speech was enough.

"Yes," she said. "It's George."

It seemed a dreadfully undramatic name for so fiendish a killer.

GEORGE WILLOCK," she said. "We played together as children. He was a strange, intense little boy. He always said he was going to marry me when we grew up. Once—I was about six—he performed a blood rite. He said it was to make my promise binding."

A psychiatrist could have found in the things Sheilah told me about George Willock's childhood the clue to his derangement.

"We went to college together," Sheilah said when she got to that part of the story. "Our families are very close and I think it's always been accepted that we would get married some day. I kept putting him off. Then one day about a year ago I woke up and thought: *I'm not going to marry George, ever.* It was a tremendous relief."

"A year ago. That was about the time I met you."

She touched my hand in the darkness. "That's *why* we met. Or at least why I saw so much of you. I wanted to convince George there was someone else."

"How did he know about me?"

"He followed us," she said quietly. "Many times, spying on us. I knew he was there but I didn't tell you. I thought he would realize eventually how hopeless it was and give up."

I tried not to sound bitter but I suppose I did. "I was more useful to you than I realized."

"Yes," she said. "Till I started to fall in love with you."

I sat very quietly, waiting.

"That's why I stopped seeing you. You've got to understand, Johnny. I knew my parents had such wonderful plans for me and—"

"They didn't include a high school English teacher."

"Somebody was going to get very hurt," she said. "I thought by breaking it off when I did, it would be me. Only when I saw you outside the church did it ever occur to me that you might have been the one who was hurt. I was very young, Johnny, and thoughtless."

I said, "You saw me at the church?"

"Yes. Just before Roy was shot. I didn't notice that he wasn't still beside me because I was staring at you." This time her fingers were on my face briefly; then they went away. "I'm sorry, Johnny."

"It's all right," I said. "Go back a little. What happened after you broke it off with me?"

"That made it worse, with George. I became frightened of him. I suppose I accepted Roy's proposal to finish things once and for all. George warned me then I'd never marry Roy or you or anyone except him. I tried to laugh it off . . . It was a terrible mistake. I killed Roy by marrying him."

I stood up. "Where does George live? I'm going after him."

"Oh, no." She grasped my coat sleeve. "Johnny, he's dangerous. He's insane."

Insane, yes, but not dangerous now. With his anonymity stripped away he was simply a jealous suitor, a chubby little man named George Willock.

"Give me his phone number," I said.

She gave it to me without any more resistance.

I said when he came on, "Hello, George. This is John Alan Daly. The stupid school teacher you tried to frame. Let's see who's stupid now!"

"Daly?" he said. He said it in a shocked voice. "Daly. How—?"

"It was simple," I taunted. "Your cheap theatricals didn't fool me for an instant. I've been on to you from the beginning. I even knew you were spying on Sheila and me."

He didn't say anything; the rabbit had turned on the hound.

I could almost hear the wheels in his disordered brain spinning frantically to evolve a new plan. "I want to talk to you, Daly," he said finally. "Will you meet me, Daly? You have nothing to be afraid of. It was Farrant I hated. I had to kill him, but you're an educated man. We can talk this out."

There was his ego again, the ten-

dency to underestimate and despise the earthbound minds of others.

"Sure, I'll meet you," I said.

He named a quiet parkway on the west side. I told him I'd be there.

For the second time that day I wanted to kill and this time I would have if it had not been for Father Cronkite. He'd informed the police and they were waiting for me when I walked out of my apartment. But it was all right now. I had George's recorded voice, and Sheila's testimony that he had admitted over the phone to killing Farrant. The police had to go along with me, as far as meeting him on the parkway.

It was they who killed George. They threw a spotlight on him as he walked toward me on the lonely road and turned screaming, utterly bereft, and charged the light. The police had no choice. He was armed and he fired as he came. They mowed him down.

And I thought, as I saw that limp unshapely thing lying on the wet highway, there but for a little mouse would have been I.

Now, in my dream—the one where I spring the mouse trap before I leave the apartment—the terror that follows is always a man with no face. For when I walked over to look upon the person who had driven me to within an inch of my reason, I saw only the result of that riot gun. From beginning to end I never laid eyes on the face of the man known as George Willock.

For that matter I never saw Father Cronkite's face either. But I have hopes of remedying that, one of these days, at my wedding. ♦♦♦

Murder is something, like winning the sweepstakes, that never happens to anybody you know. In the hands of a master of realistic detail like Cornell Woolrich, however, homicide can seem very personal indeed. We'll be surprised if you don't become as deeply involved in this story as you did in his movie, "The Window." After all, Woolrich is Woolrich, and a story about ordinary people enmeshed in an extraordinary crime is one of the things he does best.

He Looked Like Murder

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

I CAN'T SAY I took a shine to the idea of clearing out and turning the place over to him like that on a Monday night. I showed it pretty plainly, too. Monday I always did my studying for the night class I went to once a week, on Tuesday night. He knew that by now. We'd been living together long enough.

But he went ahead and asked it anyway. "I got a ring from her just before I left work. She said it's very important, she's got to see me tonight, and it's got to be some place where we can talk. Now you know I can't go over to her place on account of the way her family feel about me. So I told her to come up here, and I thought maybe you wouldn't mind . . ." And then he ended up, "Just this once. I won't ask anything like this of you again, Red."

I though, *Darned right you won't,*

because you'll get turned down flat if you do. What could I do? Refuse point-blank to his face? After all, he did have half-rights in the place.

I wouldn't have minded so much if it had been a decent night. But there was one of those fine needle-rains in the air; the kind that don't fall, that you don't even see, but that just show up by wetting the surface of the street and getting down your neck. It was no use going to the library and doing my stuff there; that closed at nine and I would only have been about half through by then. I saw that I'd have to let it go altogether tonight, try to cram it all in just before class the following evening. Just roam around for tonight and try to find some place to hang out in out of the mist.

"All right," I said, "what time does curfew go into effect?"

"Now you don't have to dodge meeting her, I don't mean that," he protested. "I don't want you to get the wrong idea about us. This isn't a date; there's nothing underhanded about it. She said it's something that concerns both our futures, and it's just that there isn't any place else we can talk in privacy. You don't have to duck out before she comes. I just thought I'd explain the situation to you ahead of time, to avoid embarrassment. She said she'd be here around eight-thirty or a little after."

"It's nearly that now." I reached for my hat, edged up my coat collar. "Maybe I can find some kind of a show," I suggested halfheartedly.

He followed me to the door. "Now don't be peeved about this, will you, Red?"

What was the use of being a grouch about it? As long as I was doing it I might as well do it obligingly. My disposition matches my hair; I can get sore, but I can't stay that way. "Forget it." He closed the door and I went down.

I met her coming up. I'd never seen her before, but I'd heard him talk enough about her to know it was she. She had on a transparent green raincoat. I'm quick to judge. She was a nice girl. So nice you'd know just by looking at her that there was nothing shady about her.

I edged over to give her room. She knew who I was too, I guess, from him. She smiled sociably. "I hope he didn't chase you out on my account," she said.

I smiled. "No, that's all right. I was

planning to go out to a show anyway."

There wasn't very much more than that for us to say; we didn't know each other, after all. "Well, good night," she said, and went on up.

"Good night," I said, and tipped my hat and went on down.

I heard him come out to the door and let her in, just before I quitted the bottom of the staircase.

I thought about the two of them intermittently during the next few hours, but only because of the inconvenience they were causing me. I had a hard time of it. I couldn't find a show that suited me. Then before I could make up my mind, it was already too late for one, so that took care of that.

I'm not a solitary drinker, so that excluded taprooms. I finally compromised by sitting down at a little coffee counter somewhere and poring slowly through a tabloid I'd bought.

When the clock hands started inching into the last half hour before midnight, I finally chucked it and started back. I'd given them three hours together. They should have been able to settle the destiny of the world in three hours.

I listened outside the door a minute to see if I could still hear her voice in there. I could hear him moving around quite plainly but I couldn't hear anything said, so she must have left.

I rapped. There was a sudden silence and the movement stopped dead, but he didn't come over to the door. I had to rap a second time.

He opened it, looked out at me. He held the door defensively a minute, at a narrow width. When he saw it was

me he opened it wide, but I'd caught the hesitation.

"What'd you do that for?" he said a little sharply, as though it had rattled him. "Didn't you have your key?"

"What's the matter, you nervous?" I said. "Sure I had my key. Why should I go dredging in my damp pockets as long as you were here?" I came in. "Girl friend gone?"

"Yeah, just before you got here."

"You're some guy. You mean you didn't even take her home?"

"I put her in a taxi at the door." He'd flung himself into a chair which happened to be facing my way. He made the mistake of crossing his ankles with his legs straight out in front of him, the soles of his shoes tipped up from the floor. I could see both of them; they were bone dry.

He was lying. He'd made that up on the spur of the moment, because he was ashamed to have me think he hadn't been more considerate of her.

I knew him well enough by now to know something was getting him. No chatter, like when he'd been out with her of an evening and I had to listen to all about how wonderful she was. On the other hand, no fretting and complaining either, like when her mother's campaign to separate them had first started in. Not a word. His face was a mask of some deep emotion or other, frozen fast, caked on him. I couldn't name what it was.

HE STAYED in that chair, made no move about getting to bed. Finally, buttoning my pajama coat, I said: "What's the matter, did you have a row?"

He didn't give me a direct answer. "Why should we have a row?"

It wasn't any of my business.

He got up suddenly, as though a spring had been uncoiled under him.

"I'm going down to the corner a minute and get a quick one," he said.

"What d'you want a drink for at this hour?"

We weren't either one of us topers. We usually went in for it only when we were out celebrating on a Saturday night or something like that. This nightcap business was something new.

"I'm going to bed," I warned him. "Better take your own key with you."

"I'm coming right back," he assured me. "I'm going to bed too."

He closed the door after him and I quit thinking about him.

I had to cross the outside room in my bare feet to put out the light, which he'd forgotten to do. Something bit into my unprotected sole, and I picked it up. I looked to see what it was, and it was a little metal clasp, with a little wisp of green slicker still thrust through it.

His girl friend had lost one of the fasteners of her raincoat. But it hadn't just loosened and dropped off; they were patented not to. The tatter of green adhering to it showed it had been torn off. Maybe she had caught it on something. I wondered why she hadn't taken it with her, to try to have it re-attached in some way.

I put it aside where it wouldn't be mislaid and went to bed.

Just as I got into it, and was set for the night, the phone started ringing. I got up, grumbling, and answered it.

It was a woman's voice. It had three

elements in it, unmistakable from the very opening phrase. Some voices can be eloquent that way. The three tonal components were a deep-seated, cold hostility—the sort of hostility that has been borne over a considerable period of time; a heated resentment—newer, brought on by the occasion itself and kept in leash only with difficulty; and lastly, less discernible than the other two, a thread of fear.

The voice didn't give any opening salutation. "Will you please put my daughter on?" it began without prelude. "She promised me to have a definite understanding with you once and for all, and to come right back. Those were the conditions under which I let her see you tonight, and if you think that you'll get anywhere by trying to influence her until all hours of the—" Then she stopped short and said: "This is Mr. Dixon, isn't it?" She hated even to have to pronounce the name. I suppose she called him "that young man" to the girl.

Her manner irritated me. I'd been trying to say that it wasn't all along. "No, this is Stewart Carr, his roommate. I expect him back any minute."

THE COLD hostility and the resentment immediately veered off; they weren't meant for me personally. Only the thread of fear remained.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said stiffly. "Well, I presume she's left, then. If he were a gentleman, he would have seen to it that she reached home before now. He wouldn't have kept her there until this hour, on such a rainy night, until I had to phone."

I tried to be reassuring about it. "She left over three-quarters of an hour ago. She ought to be there any minute now." That should have been about right. I'd been in at least that long myself, and Dixon had said she'd left just before I . . .

I'd evidently said the wrong thing. Fear took over the voice, crowding everything else out. "*Three-quarters of an hour ago!* Then why isn't she back here by now? It's only six blocks. It shouldn't take her that long."

It shouldn't have, if that was all it was. And he'd said he'd put her in a cab, which would have cut the time down to next to nothing. I had sense enough not to mention that detail.

"It would be just like him to keep her loitering along the way on a wet night like this!" the voice went on bitterly.

She was assuming that Dixon was bringing her back, I could see. I didn't know whether I ought to disabuse her on this point or not. It would probably add fuel to her disquiet, to hear he'd let her make her own way back. And since the girl was bound to reach there any minute, what difference did it make anyway? Let her find out from the girl herself what had caused the delay.

"She'll probably be there in no time now," I said.

"I sincerely hope so," she replied. And then on a note of taut warning, "If she isn't back here soon I'll—" She didn't finish it. She'd hung up.

I did too. I gave the oblivious door a dirty look. Why didn't he come up here and answer his own tracer-calls? I had to get some sleep. I had to get

up early in the morning and go to work..

I climbed back in bed and dropped off. Then sleep smashed apart, like an electric-light bulb that you pop, and the damn phone was ringing away again in the middle of the fragments.

I went out to it in a sort of blur, too groggy even to be sore this time. It woke me right up, like a slap of cold water in the face. It was the same woman.

You wouldn't have known it by the voice. The voice was husky this time with out-and-out terror. No more gentle indignation and trepidation. Stark fright, maternal, unreasoning, straining at the leash of self-possession.

"I demand to speak with John Dixon! I demand to know what's become of my daughter!"

"She isn't back yet?"

My futile surprise went unnoticed. "What has he done with her? Why isn't she here? My Estelle wouldn't stay out until this hour of her own accord; I know her better than that! I've been pacing the floor here until I can't stand it any more. I've even been down to the corner three times in all the rain to see if I could see her coming . . . Do you *know* what time it is?"

I hadn't until then. I thought maybe this was twenty minutes later. "Just a minute." I reached for the switch with my free hand, put on the light, looked at the clock. Quarter to three in the morning! He'd been gone himself nearly three hours. She was supposed to have left for home over three and a half hours ago, and she lived only six blocks away!

I didn't know what to say. "He—he stepped down to the corner and he hasn't come back yet . . ." I faltered. But I'd told her that hours ago.

The voice was repressing hysteria only with the greatest difficulty. "Why does he refuse to come to the phone himself and face me like a man? What does he think he'll gain by avoiding me like this? He can't do this to me. I warned her; I told her all along if she kept on seeing him, something would happen sooner or later . . ."

I didn't say anything this time. What was there I could say? The voice was utterly beyond control now, had disintegrated. It was awful to have to stand there and listen to it. It went right through you.

"I want my little girl back! What's he done with her? I'm going to notify the police. They'll help me; they'll find out why she doesn't come home . . ."

Suddenly she had hung up and there was silence.

And then, just a minute too late, his key clicked the lock and he came in, looking haunted.

CHAPTER TWO

I SAID WRATHFULLY: "Well, it's about time! Where the hell have you been? You go down for just one drink and you stay down half the night—and let me do your dirty work for you up here!"

Something electric flickered over his face. "What's up?" he said.

"You're in trouble, that's what's up. Your girl never got home from here tonight. Her mother's phoned twice

since you've been gone, and the last time she said she was going to notify the police. You better get over there fast and find out what's happened."

I waited. He waited too. He stood there looking at me, without moving.

"Well, don't you think you better at least call her back?"

"She wouldn't listen to me; she wouldn't give a chance to . . . She hates me. She's been trying to break us up. If anything's happened . . . this is my finish."

"That's no kind of a reason. The girl was over here and she knows it. At least get in touch with the woman. If you don't, she's liable to think the worst."

"But that's what I'm trying to tell you; she does already."

I didn't know what to do against a line of reasoning like that. It was all haywire. It was going to lead him into trouble, if he wasn't in it already.

I shut up for awhile and watched him. He wasn't drunk. He'd been down drinking for three solid hours—supposedly—and yet he wasn't drunk. I thought I'd like to find out about that.

"Where were you, at McGinnis?" I asked off-handedly.

He nodded dully, looking at the floor.

That was the place on our corner. I'd been in there with him often enough. They had bowlfuls of oyster crackers sitting at each end of the long bar. I'd never been in there with him yet but what he hadn't had a few crackers in his pocket when he came away.

He'd hung his coat off the northeast corner of his chair. "Got a cigarette?" I said, and went over to it and reached

down into the flap pocket. A solitary oyster cracker came up in my hand.

"You didn't get much of an edge," I said, taking one of my own cigarettes instead, without letting him see me. He could have been in there five minutes and still put that cracker in his pocket. And then what had become of the other two hours and fifty-five?

"I didn't even finish the one drink I bought, just sat there moping. I didn't realize how time had passed."

I was standing by the window with my back to him, looking down at the patent-leather finish the rain had given the street. I stiffened my back. I thought I'd better give it to him ahead of time, let him get ready. I said without turning my head: "A cop just got out and came in here."

"Red, you've got to stick by me."

This time I did turn my head, fast. "What do you mean I've got to stick by you?"

He clutched at the back of his neck, groped for the answer. "If they come here and ask you if—if you saw her leave, tell them you did. Tell them you came along just in time to see me come down to the street door with her and put her in a taxi."

"But I didn't." My tone was flat.

"I know you didn't, but if you'd been five minutes sooner you would have. Don't you see, the way it is now no one saw her leave here. She ends here. If I can at least produce some one that'll say they saw her leave here . . . That five minutes makes all the difference."

I remembered the dry soles of his shoes. I had to be sure of what I was

doing. "But which'll I be doing," I asked, "describing something I just missed seeing, or describing something that didn't happen for anyone to see? Are you *sure* you took her down to the door and put her in a cab?"

I DON'T know if my look warned him off, or he just thought better of it himself. Anyway, he gave the right answer this time. "N-no," he corrected himself, "I didn't take her down to the door myself. But you can be sure she left here, and you can be sure she left here in a taxi."

"The first time, you told me *you* took her down and put her in the taxi."

"I know. It wasn't this serious yet. It didn't seem to matter much one way or another then. I was ashamed to let you think I was heel enough not to see her off right. We parted on the outs; she just walked out. Then I heard her whistling up a taxi from the doorway downstairs. I could hear it plainly through the windows. I heard one drive up, she darted out and climbed into it, and—"

"Wait a minute. You saw her get into it?"

He gave me a harried look. "I got over to the window a minute too late. Her figure had just crouched in. Her hand was still on the door handle, pulling it shut after her. Who else could it have been? She had just left the room up here a minute before. I stayed on there at the window after the cab drove off, brooding down at the rain for a good five minutes or more, and no one else came out of the house. That must have been her in the cab. Now,

is it going to hurt you to say you saw that too, from down at the corner? All I'm asking, Red, is—"

Before I could answer, the knock had sounded on the door. The knock we'd both been expecting from one minute to the next, held back like a Chinese water-drop torture. I jerked my thumb toward the sound.

Even then he found time to make his plea once more, in a husky, anxious whisper, as he edged reluctantly across the room: "Are you with me, Red? How about it, are you with me?"

He needed moral support bad. I couldn't help wondering why he should. Why wasn't his own sense of innocence support enough?

It was just the curtain raiser, this first time. Just routine, just a uniformed patrolman sent around to check. No question of foul play yet. Missing Persons didn't even have it yet. Just a complaint of a worried mother.

For that very reason I couldn't help wondering as I saw that shield coming in the door, that openly-worn shield that usually forecast little more than a ticket for parking overtime or a warning to "Cut out that noise up here now," why Dixon should be so ready to expect the worst. Why should he seem so ahead of the game? He seemed rushing to meet the worst possible conclusion before anyone else was, including the authorities themselves. Except the mother. And mothers—are they gifted with special foresight or are they blinded by lack of it?

It went off very smoothly, without a hitch. The cop jotted in a notebook. Dixon answered what he asked him.

He Looked Like Murder

"... about quarter to twelve . . . no, I offered to, but she wouldn't let me; she said she had a raincoat, and she'd get a cab right from the door . . ." He didn't mention what he'd told me, that they'd parted "on the outs."

That reminded me of something. I looked over at the table where I'd put that raincoat clasp I'd trodden on. It wasn't there any more. I looked at Dixon. He looked down his cheeks.

The cop only asked me one thing. "Were you here?"

I answered with only one word, "No." That was the extent of my participation. The problem in ethics Dixon had posed for me hadn't even come up—yet.

The cop left. We went to bed. It was four by that time. He was still awake when I went to sleep. He was awake again—or yet—when I woke up.

We didn't talk about it. I was in too much of a hurry and too sleepy to be able to give a thought to anything but getting down on time. I tore out of the place without a word.

HE WASN'T there when I got back. Some one else was. I came in and found a man making himself at home in our easy chair, pretending to read a newspaper. You could tell he'd just picked it up when he heard me at the door. One edge of the carpet was a little rippled, as though it had been turned over, then flung back.

We'd had the curtain raiser. This was the first act.

I said: "What goes on?" without too much cordiality.

He showed a badge. "Super let me

in to wait for you boys. You Carr? You the fellow that lives here with Dixon?"

"That's right."

"A girl named Estelle Mitchell came here last night, didn't she?"

"Yes," I said coolly, "a girl dropped in here last night, and I believe her name was Mitchell."

"What time'd she get here?"

"Eight-thirty."

"You saw her come in?"

"I met her on the stairs, on my way out."

"What time'd you get back yourself?"

"Close to twelve."

"Was she still here then?"

"She'd just left."

"How'd you know she just left? Did your friend tell you that, or did you see her leave?"

The problem in ethics had come up. It wasn't my own skin I gave a rap about. If I could have been sure of him, Dixon, I would have gladly said I took her back to her own door myself, and the devil with this dick and all other dicks. But I wasn't as sure of him as—well, as I would have liked to be. "I as good as saw her leave," I said.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"As I turned the corner and came in sight of the house here, I saw a cab standing waiting to take on someone at the door. I saw a figure run out and get in it, and I saw my friend standing up at the window looking down. . . ."

"You're positive it was she?"

"That isn't what I said." I was willing to step as far over the line for him as I possibly could, but not all the way—

until I was sure. "I'm sure it was a girl. But the night was too murky and I was too far away to be able to recognize her face. When I got upstairs a minute later, he told me she'd just left. Draw your own conclusions."

"Had you ever seen this Mitchell girl before?"

"No, last night on the stairs was the first time I met her."

That inclined him to leniency in my favor, I could see. I mean about this figure-in-the-doorway angle. How could I be expected to recognize her from a distance, in a needle-rain?

"What time does he get back as a rule?"

He was always back before now other nights. "Oh, he's not very punctual," I said carelessly. "He may have stopped off at the Mitchell's to see if they've had any word."

"Yeah? Well, I'll wait."

"Is it all right if I step out and feed? I've been running on a malted milk since noon."

He made a reassuring hand-pass toward me. "You go ahead, Carr."

I didn't like the way that sounded. As much as to say, *It's not you we're after.*

I gave him a look, but I got up and went. I headed for a place around the corner. I heard a sharp hiss and turned. He was standing there in a doorway

I stopped short, veered in. "Well, I'll be blamed! What're you doing in there, playing hide-and-seek?"

"My shoelace came undone; I had to step in here and fasten it." Then he said, "Has anyone been around?"

"There's a dick up there right now

waiting to talk to you," I told him.

Even so, he shouldn't have flinched the way he did. I waited for him to make a move; he didn't.

"Well, why don't you go up and get it over with?"

He just looked at me, as if I were asking him to go into a den with a man-eating lion.

"Have you been around to the Mitchell's?"

He shook his head, looked down.

"Haven't you even called up? You mean you haven't once gotten in touch with them since last night?"

"The old lady hates me, I tell you. She'll fly off the handle, scream all kinds of things at me. I can't face it, now less than ever."

"Look, Dixon," I tried to point out, "you're doing all the wrong things, all the way through this. I know how it is; you're nervous and jumpy. But you didn't have anything to do with her disappearance, so why should you dodge her mother or the dicks?"

"Even you," he said bitterly. "You ought to see your eyes when you say that. There's a sort of stare in them, like you weren't sure yourself."

I hadn't meant to let him see that; it was there without my knowing it. I figured the best—and kindest—way to cover that up was to ignore the accusation altogether. "You better go on up to the place, Dixon," I advised him crisply. "Your shoelace is fastened now."

| WALKED AWAY, thinking that he wasn't the type this should have happened to. He was going to make a

mess of it before he was through. If it had happened to me, for instance, I would have been hanging around headquarters day and night, getting in their way, cursing them out for not finding her quicker. He seemed to sort of skulk and act suspicious, as if he had something to hide.

I ate and then I went back. He was out again. He came in about forty minutes afterwards. He almost seemed to reel in. He looked drained of blood; he'd turned so white that it wouldn't wear off. And when he took off his coat and vest, there was a dark sweat stain down the back of his shirt.

"They had me down at headquarters to question me," he said. He slumped into a chair, pulled the knot of his tie loose as though it were choking him, took a long shuddering breath. "I thought they weren't going to let me go."

I pitched up my shoulders. "Why shouldn't they let you go?"

He didn't say. "Gee, I can't stand much more of this."

"I dunno, you never seemed particularly sensitive until now," I let him know. "Why should you let it get you like this? They gotta ask questions, don't they? There's nothing personal in it . . ."

He gave a bitter laugh. "They made it seem pretty personal, down there just now."

I thought, *If you acted down there like you're acting up here, you didn't do yourself any too much good!* If he wouldn't help himself, somebody ought to at least try to put an oar in for him, and I supposed that left it up to me. I

walked around the room awhile. Finally I stopped by him, laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, for your own sake, I want you to do something for me. Call up the mother and at least say something to her. Don't just lie low like this. At least find out if anything's been heard."

He shied away. "I keep telling you, in her mind I'm already responsible for whatever's happened. There's nothing I can do or say."

I took another few turns around the room. "Did the girl mean anything to you at all?" I said curtly.

That caught him off guard. "Red, I was crazy about her. I'da done anything rather than lose her. I'da rather seen her dead than have her go to him. . ." He realized too late how that sounded, bit it off short.

Everything wrong! He said and did everything wrong.

"Well, that's a crack I wouldn't make twice," I advised. I picked up the phone.

"What're you going to do?"

"What's their number? What's the number of her house?"

He gave me the number and I called it for him. A man answered first. For some reason I got the idea he was a detective. I said: "Mrs. Mitchell, please."

"Who is this wants her?"

"Dixon wants to speak to her," I said noncommittally.

He must have been a detective. There was too long a wait. They must have been talking it over. Suddenly I heard her say distinctly, within a foot of the phone, to someone else: "You shouldn't make me; you shouldn't ask me to."

I hitched my head at him commandingly. "Come on, I've got her for you." Even now, I could only get him to come halfway toward it; I brought it the rest of the way, shoved it into his hands, left it there.

He sounded very lame. I couldn't help thinking that myself while I listened.

"Mrs. Mitchell, any word of Estelle yet?"

That was as far as he got. She cut in with something. I could hear the rasping against the transmitter. His face got as white as though a whip had creased it. He let go of the thing and it hit the floor like a shot.

I picked it up and put it to my own ear. She was just saying one thing over and over. "Murderer!"

CHAPTER THREE

HE WAS taking a drink when I hung up and looked around. He'd brought a new bottle in with him when he came back from Headquarters. I couldn't blame him for that, either. I would have wanted something to wash down a word like that myself, if it had been jammed into my craw.

But even now, if it had been me, I would have gone tearing over there and raised holy cain with her, whether she was grief-crazed or not, for having the nerve to. . . But it wasn't me. I was just the fellow he lived with. And far to the back of my mind, there was this suppressed thought struggling to come clear—I would, that is, assuming that I were innocent. If I were guilty, if the shoe fitted, how did I know but

what I wouldn't act just about like. . . he was?

I kept that thought pushed back. I left him and went out. I could tell by the way he acted, kept edging up slantwise to the window, that he was worried that they'd already posted some one down there to watch him, tail him if he went in or out. For my part, it wouldn't have surprised me if they had. And it still didn't have to mean anything much. Whether he let it hamper him or not all depended on what was in his own mind.

"You coming back soon?" he asked.

Other nights he didn't give a rap whether I came back soon or late. I knew what he was dying to ask me, but didn't have the nerve to: "See if you notice anyone hanging around watching the house."

"I'll be back," I said indefinitely. I had a couple things on my mind I wanted to attend to.

If there was a spotter, the spotter knew his business; I couldn't see him for love nor money.

This McGinnis was a monkish-looking Celt with a bald crown; you kept looking for the hood and tasseled girdle. He knew Dixon and me like his right arm. Anytime we stepped in anywhere for a drink, for over eight months now, it was at his place.

"Was my pal in here last night?" I wanted to find out about those missing three hours.

"Dixon?" he said. "That he was. And what was the matter with him? He left half his drink behind."

He'd told me that himself. "I was looking high and low for him," I said,

to cover it up so it wouldn't sound like a check-up. "How long was he in here, about? Can you remember?"

"He was in here till a good thray o'clock. He held the fort, that he did; there wasn't another soul."

That was just the time he'd got back to the flat. I felt relieved. I even dunked my upper lip into a beer I didn't want.

"Is he feeling any better today?" he went on.

I thought he meant on account of the unfinished drink, or because he'd been noticeably downcast. I would have let it go at that.

"The best thing to do for an upset stomach is just lave it alone," he rambled.

I brought my scattered thoughts up short. Upset stomach? He had his symptoms crossed. Or did he? I didn't ask him. There was only one way he could have arrived at such a mistaken diagnosis.

I waited a minute or two, then I said: "Be with you," and went back to the washroom. I'd probably been in it once or twice before, but it hadn't been vital to notice it closely until now. There was just a rather unclean washstand, and a booth with a slatted half-door. It was very small and very uncertainly lighted.

THE WINDOW was chink-narrow and very long. The glass was of a double opacity, whitewashed and then filmed with accumulated dust. It was open a little from the top, for ventilation. It seemed humanly impossible for an adult to squeeze out through it. More important still, he'd only come in here to

McGinnis' *after*. What would he have gained by establishing an alibi then?

I stopped short. It wasn't like me to start suspecting him. Well, then why didn't his behavior give me a chance to stand up for him?

I got up on the edge of the washstand with one foot and peered out through the top of the window. The light coming from behind me mushroomed out against blank brickwork only about four feet in front of my face. The window just looked out on an airshaft bored down into the building; no way of getting up, no way of getting down.

Stepping down off the washstand, I opened the dust-caked pane from the bottom. I wanted to see the bottom of the shaft. It ended only a few feet below the window. I looked at it a very long time, but the light was too poor to see much.

I happened to have a newspaper furled up in my side pocket. I took it out, struck a match, and set the end of it on fire. Then I stuck it, burning, through the window and held it out above the shaft floor. It played it up to a dusky orange, plenty bright enough. I pulled the improvised torch in again before it got out of control, stamped it out on the floor. It had done the trick, shown me what my eyes had only been able to guess at.

I tried with my arm first, but it couldn't get anywhere near the shaft floor. I never chewed gum. I went out to the main room and bought a penny package from a machine and mashed it up. I didn't want to have to ask McGinnis for anything; he probably

wouldn't have had anything the right length anyway. He didn't notice me come out; he was busy taking orders.

I went to work on one of the slats of the booth door, wrenched it out of its socket at both ends and used that. It was the same principle kids use in dredging up coins through a sidewalk grating. I stuck the gum on the end of the slat, poked it through the window, stabbed the shaft floor twice and each time came back with something I had seen before.

They were the two mates to the patented raincoat fastener I had trodden on up at our place. And if there was any doubt in my mind that they were mates, the tatter of green plastic clinging to each one settled that.

That accounted for three of them. Three out of a possible four, at the very most. To lose that many fasteners, that raincoat had been subjected to the roughest sort of treatment, must have been wrenched at and pulled around unmercifully—with its wearer inside it. Even so, it wasn't the patent that had failed to meet the test. The fabric around it was what had given way under the strain.

Even the implication of violence didn't make me feel as creepy as the attempt at concealment. The washroom window must have been open only from the top, as I had found it myself, and perhaps he didn't realize the floor of the shaft was as accessible to the washroom as it turned out to have been.

I was in a blue funk when I came out of McGinnis'. Keep an open mind, I told myself, as long as you can. Don't jump to too hasty conclusions. Give the

guy the benefit of the doubt; you'd want it given to you in his place. But it was already like swimming upstream.

IF I HADN'T known I was going to end up at the Mitchell's until then, there wasn't much doubt of it by the time I came out of McGinnis' with those two raincoat fasteners in my pocket. Where else could I go? Back to him? He'd made the third fastener I'd already retrieved once at our place disappear a second time. To the police? Not at this stage of the game.

Maybe not at any stage of the game. When you watch a guy going down in quicksand before your eyes, if he doesn't deserve to, you give him a hand; if he does, maybe you fold your arms and let him go. But at least you don't shovel rocks on his head to make him go down faster.

I had to look it up in a phone directory. There was a half column of Mitchells, but I had no trouble separating the appropriate one. He'd already given me the phone number that paired with it, *Mrs. Fanny A.* It was only about six blocks from our place, as she'd said last night. Almost too short a distance for any anonymous harm to have befallen the girl. It made it seem more likely it had been a personally directed, intentional harm, meant for her alone by someone who knew her.

The building was an outworn apartment house that just managed to maintain itself above tenement status, more through its cleanliness than anything else. The mother evidently lived on her income, and a very tenuous one at that.

The apartment was on the ground floor, and after I'd located it I had an attack of last minute qualms about going in. I wondered if I was being a hypocrite by coming here like this, with two of the very fasteners from her raincoat packaged in my pocket at the moment, and yet no intention of turning them over to them. It was a hell of a thing to do; either I was on their side or I was on his.

I poised my finger above the doorbell. Then I dropped it again. I started to walk back and forth undecided across the lobby.

I still hadn't been able to make up my mind when I heard the street door open. Two cops came in carrying a small hamper between them. They had newspapers spread loosely over the top of it. I heard one ask the other: "Why didn't they have her come down, instead of us bringing it up here?"

"I dunno, I guess she couldn't take it. Must be an awful shock to her."

They started diagonally across the lobby to the door on the left. When they got halfway to it the leader said: "Naw, it's the one on this side," and abruptly changed directions. They ended up before the one I had just been hesitating outside of myself a moment before. But the swerve was violent enough to dislodge part of the newspaper covering on top of what they were carrying.

It was just a fluke that I happened to be standing right there at that moment. They didn't try to hide the momentary glimpse I was afforded of what was in the hamper. They didn't look twice at me; I was just some one wait-

ing to be taken up to one of the higher floors. They didn't think the tattered, grimy, green raincoat lying spread on top of other maltreated garments would have any particular meaning to me, or that I could transmit the knowledge to the one place they didn't want it to go until they were ready for it.

I didn't get out fast enough. The mother must have been somewhere close at hand near the apartment door. They just about got in with it, took the newspapers off, when her scream slashed through the door like a knife through cheesecloth. That was indenification, complete, devastating, final—that harried scream that ended in a soft thump on wood.

I got outside to the street fast, then. The six blocks, that were all the margin of lead I had, streamed by under me. I can't remember now whether I actually ran or just hiked fast. I kept thinking, "What'll I do about this?"

I slowed when I got to our corner. They might have someone watching the place already. They must have.

I walked slowly only to the door. Once inside, I ran up the stairs again. I keyed the door open and closed it behind me again with camera-shutter rapidity. I paused for a moment, breathing heavily.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE OUTSIDE room was dark; at first I thought he was out. But when I got to the bedroom he was in there. He was lying on the bed. Not like you lie on it to sleep on it; the other way, across it from side to side, head down,

face buried in a tragic nest he'd made out of his arms. He reared his head when he heard me come in.

"That you, Red?"

"Yeah, it's Red." I stood in the doorway looking at him.

He got up off the bed, slowly, one limb at a time. He tried not to show he could feel me looking at him. Finally he couldn't help it any more. "What d'you keep looking at me for?"

"You better get ready for a long pull. Your girl's dead."

His face shifted gears. I thought he was going to cry, but if he did it didn't come to the top. He said: "Are they sure?"

"They were just bringing her things into the flat when I was outside it just now. I recognized the raincoat—"

I heard him draw his breath in, deep. Then suddenly he wasn't in the room any more. I went after him. "I'm going to get out of here," he said in a smothered voice. The panic was on him. He wanted to run.

I slammed the door shut again before he'd gotten it far enough out to get through it. "Now wait a minute. Don't lose your head. You're doing the worst possible thing."

"I'm getting out! I saw how they acted about it tonight at Headquarters. They only let me go because they didn't have anything on me then."

He kept trying to get the door open. I kept trying to hold it back.

"Did you come back here to hold me for them?"

"No. I came back to tip you off ahead of time, I guess . . ." I took one arm down off the door.

"Then lemme get out, Red. Gimme a chance, at least!"

"Don't you see what you're doing? You're as good as admitting the fact you did something to her. You're advertising it."

He was past reasoning with. "It's easy for you to talk, isn't it? It's not *your* freedom, is it? It's not your neck, your life. I should stay here and let them bag me, and never have a fighting chance from then on!"

He couldn't get out past me and he couldn't get me out of the way. He had to give up finally. He flopped back into a chair, stayed there inert, panting. I stayed there by the door, also breathing hard.

"My own friend," he said, finally.

Maybe that did the trick, I don't know. If he'd kept on trying to edge me aside, force his way out, I suppose I'd have kept blocking him. It was when he quit trying, slumped down like that, that it got to me.

"I don't think you can make it any more." I side-stepped grudgingly. I took a look from the window. Nothing yet. He didn't try to make a break for the door, even after I'd left it.

I went into the bedroom, came back with the coat and hat I'd just had on me, threw them over at him. "All right, there's your chance; take it if you want it," I said. "They've seen me in this outfit two or three times already; you may get away with it. You'd better not try the street. Go out through the back yard and maybe you can get through to the next one like I did that night when that installment collector was on my tail. And if you do make it, walk

like I do, long slouchy strides—not snappy ones like you take. Keep your left hand in your trouser pocket the whole time. That's me. Wear the hat down forward like I do, almost over the bridge of your nose. Until you get—wherever you're going."

He opened the door. I was soft, I was molasses.

"Here, d'you need dough? You better take this with you." I shoved some into his hand.

He tried to shake mine, but mine wasn't there any more. "Where'll I get in touch with you, Red?"

"D'you want to?"

"Sure, I—I've got to find out what happens. I'll find some way; it won't be here or at the place you work!" He turned and went out.

There went a foolish guy. He had to have his chance, I suppose. You'd give a dog his chance.

I watched him down the first flight. I couldn't tell if he looked like me or not, because I couldn't tell what I looked like. He didn't look like himself, to me, in that hat and coat, so maybe that was enough.

I listened until he got the rest of the way down. The stairs must have been clear because I heard him get the yard door open and go out. I rapped once against the wooden door frame beside me, for luck. His luck. Then I closed the door and went in.

"Now, what'd I do that for?" I wondered, shaking my head.

TIT TOOK them a little while to make their arrangements, I guess, or maybe they'd had to wait for orders from

higher up. They had no inkling that there was any hurry about it, that I'd accidentally tapped a wire, so to speak, or they would have been over a lot sooner. The knock on the door, of course, was an indication in itself that he'd made it.

There were two of them. The man in the lead slanted me aside as if I was just part of the door, strode through to the bedroom. "Come on out, Dixon. Don't make us go in after you."

"He's not in there," I said innocently.

The other one was the same one who had been installed up here when I got home earlier tonight—Hiller I heard his teammate call him. "He's skipped, Hiller. Here's his hat and coat."

Hiller went in and took a look. He caught on fast. "Where are yours?" he said coming back.

"On the third hook from the left in the closet," I tried to stall him.

"You mean he walked out in 'em." He was trying to get me for being an accessory. "Now what were you doing while this was going on?"

"I was in there shaving. How'd I know he was going to take a powder?"

He went in the bathroom, opened the cabinet, and tested the bristle of my brush. Then he dried off the tips of his fingers on a towel. Even that didn't satisfy him; he reached up and felt the side of my face. Sure I'd shaved. I always shaved at nights. I'd had nearly fifteen minutes to shave, between the time Dixon left and the detectives got here.

Hiller narrowed his eyes at me. "Are you sure you weren't in on this?"

"What would I get out of it either

way, whether Dixon stayed or went?"

I had him there so beautifully that he failed to notice I'd answered his question by asking him one of my own.

"No use waiting," he said to his partner. "He won't be back. You better come down with us, Carr. I think we'd like to ask you a few, this time."

I had to go without my hat and coat; my friend had mine. Hiller even suggested I put on Dixon's. I couldn't bring myself to do it, for some strange reason —call it superstition if you like. I still wasn't positive they hadn't last been worn by some one who had taken a life.

They pegged away at me down there quite a bit, but it didn't get them anywhere. Whether you're telling a lie or telling the truth, the whole art of it lies in simplicity; stick to something simple and don't ball yourself up. I'd seen the figure of a woman get in a cab at my doorway, through the mist; I didn't claim it was Estelle Mitchell, I never had. That was the whole gist and burden of my story. How could anyone trip on anything as short and uncomplicated as that? Well—detectives like this Hiller get a pretty good salary. I was now about to find out why.

They didn't let on that I'd fallen face flat, so to speak. Hiller just mumbled, "Ask you to go up to Mrs. Mitchell's with us for a few minutes," and we were on our way again.

It was a typical old style interior: gloomy hall going back for miles, with doors opening all the way down it. A man that I thought at first was a teammate of theirs, working at this end, admitted us. He was up in his late thirties, I should say.

Hiller said: "Hello, Tremholt. We'd like Mrs. Mitchell to come out and hear something a minute."

He cranked his head kind of dubiously. "The doctor was with her until now. He just about got her quieted down. Go easy, will you, fellows?" But he went down the hall to one of the end doors.

Evidently he wasn't a policeman but some relative or member of the family. Meanwhile, we'd detoured into an old-fashioned parlor, cluttered up with junk. The girl's late father, in a photographic enlargement, looked down from one wall, the mother from the other.

She came in a minute later, on the arm of this Tremholt, and made the picture a liar. The thing had turned her inside out. Her eyes were lost in deep pits. She could only hate now, thirst for vengeance; that was all that was left to her. She hated well. For the first time I could understand Dixon's peculiar skittishness about facing her.

TREMHOLT LED her to a chair, arm solicitously about her, said: "Sit down, Mom." I couldn't figure him as the girl's brother; he must have been a half-brother. Then he stood attentively behind her, hand resting on the back of her chair.

He taken out his own anxiety and grief in a much simpler form: nail biting. I'd never seen such nails; they were down to the quick, and even past it. The indentations were still left to show how much of them had been gnawed away. A poodle, which had a sort of wistful air, like it missed her too, had trailed into the room.

Hiller said: "Now just once more, in Mrs. Mitchell's presence."

"Why, simply," I began uneasily, "that I saw a woman's figure enter a cab . . ." I ran through it once again. I could sense something had come up, but couldn't get what it was.

"I'm not calling you on that," he said quietly. "What I want to know is, did you hear the signal given, the hail, that brought the cab down the street to your doorway for her?" And then, for bait: "There must have been one; no cab driver's attention could have been attracted if she'd just waved an arm in that kind of visibility."

I could sense the trap. He wanted to drive a wedge between my version and Dixon's. I only had a split-second in which to make up my mind, with three pairs of eyes boring into me. If I denied hearing her summon the cab, that would shake the credibility of Dixon's version, wouldn't it? How had he been able to hear it, through a closed window, if I hadn't heard it, right out there in the open.

There was also a trap within a trap. He was decoying me by using the terms *signal, hail*. He wasn't going to trip me up on that. Dixon had said unmistakably that she'd whistled for one.

"There was no hail given," I said. "There was a whistle. I heard it."

No one said anything. They seemed to be waiting for Mrs. Mitchell to speak, as though they already knew something. I didn't. Tremholz looked down at her from behind her chair. Hiller looked across the room at her.

She spoke at last, in a deathly low voice. "My daughter couldn't whistle.

Not a note. It was an absolute limitation, some kink in her tongue maybe. All she could do was make a soundless breath, like some one blowing soap bubbles."

She'd been addressing Hiller until now. Now she turned on me, as Tremholz started to lead her out of the room. "So if you heard a woman in your doorway whistling for a cab, it was not my daughter. You did not see my daughter leave that house!" And then from further down the hall, out of sight: "And no one else did either!"

Hiller sat there looking at me, and I sat looking at my own innermost thoughts. They were a glowing red, and they kept repeating a single phrase over and over again: *The dirty liar! The dirty liar!* I didn't mean the dick.

I went back with him to headquarters from there. I still wasn't turning stool pigeon. I couldn't have anyway, even if I'd wanted to. I didn't know where he'd gone. And if—and when—I found out, I considered that a little personal matter between him and me. I wasn't doing their work for them.

They wore out finally. The lieutenant or whoever he was in charge suggested: "Why don't you boys take him over and let him see for himself what this precious friend of his has done? Then maybe he'll feel a little differently about it."

That was the first I knew that the body had been found.

They took me over to the morgue with them. They drew out a sort of drawer they had her in and whisked back the covering. It would have been tough enough to take even without the

way they stood around me and rubbed it in.

Her neck had been broken in some horrible way; I'd never seen anything like it in my life before. The whole head was twisted out of line with the body. I couldn't understand how anyone one of less than abnormal strength could do it.

THEY TOOK pains not to leave me in the dark on this point. "Take a good look, Carr. This girl was twenty-two years old, think of that. Do you want to know just what happened to her, with accompanying blueprints? She went to this skunk-friend of yours to tell him they were through; that she was giving in to the old lady and marrying Tremholt . . ."

"Marrying Tremholt?" I'd thought he was her brother until them.

"He's boarded with the Mitchells for years and he's been crazy about her ever since she was in grade school. The understanding always was that he was to marry her when she was old enough. He's practically subsidized the mother for years. She could never repay the amounts she owes him. But that was all right. It was supposed to be all in the family. The girl thought he was pretty swell herself, until Dixon came along. She wasn't coerced into giving him up; Dixon's glamour started to wear thin and she finally saw things her mother's way.

"All right, so she told Dixon that night. The old lady was a fool to let her go there alone, and Tremholt didn't know about it. The girl gave your pal the brush-off and walked out on him.

He got his second wind, ran after her, caught up with her on the next landing, and started to drag her back, throttling her so she couldn't scream. He didn't kill her then, but she'd lost consciousness and he thought he had. He lost his head, dragged her on up a flight above his own door, and secreted himself in the incinerator closet on that floor, maybe because he'd heard somebody come out below.

"You know those incinerator closets in your building, Carr. A metal flap that you pull down gives onto the perpendicular chute that carries the refuse down to the basement to be burned. Now listen to this if you can stand it—and remember we can show you the scientific evidence for every one of these steps. It's not just a theoretical reconstruction.

"He pulled down the flap and tried to unload her body—and she was still alive, see?—down the chute, head first, toward the basement and eventual incineration. It was just a panic-reflex. The flap opening wasn't wide enough, any more than the chute backing it would have been; but there was evidently some one coming up or down the stairs at that moment and he was crazed. He wedged her in, and then when he tried to extricate her again, after the immediate danger had receded and he could think more clearly, the head and the one shoulder that he had managed to insert, jammed. You can see what happened by looking—"

"Cut it out," I said sickly. "Cut it out."

"He finally heaved her out, but in doing so he broke her neck against the

angle of the chute. The only consolation is that she was unconscious at the time. *That guy has been sleeping on the same mattress with you, Carr!*"

I took out a handkerchief and patted it around my mouth.

"When the coast was clear, he hauled her on up the rest of the way to the roof. He went over the communicating roofs as far as he could—four buildings away, toward Demarest Street—and found a barrel there. They'd recently tarred and graveled that roof, and the barrel was left over. He put her in that, first emptying the gravel that remained, then recovering her lightly with it. The workmen who carried it away got it all the way downstairs before they realized it was weighing too much and found out what was in it.

"It's the prettiest case we've had in years." And they didn't mean pretty.

"Now, d'you still want to go to bat for a guy that did anything like that? Tell us where you think he's gone; you must have some idea."

I took the handkerchief away from my mouth, and looked at them a long time, and said slowly: "Gents, I only wish I did have."

And I meant it.

CHAPTER FIVE

ON THAT note they let me go home. They knew I was on ice now. They knew I'd keep. They could tell just by the look in my eyes.

I didn't sleep well that night. I threw the mattress on the floor and slept on the naked bed frame. I kept seeing her before me. She spoke to me the way she

had on the stairs. *He didn't chase you out on my account, did he?* Only her head was twisted around so that it practically faced forward across her shoulder.

She was buried the next day. I went to the services. The mother was there, and Tremholt, sitting close to her, looking after her, as usual. It must have been tough on him. He was under a strain, you could see. He kept breaking up wooden matchsticks between his fingers, sitting there in the pew with her. Afterwards, when the few of us filed out, I glanced down and the floor was covered with them around where he'd been sitting.

Monday came around again, and I had to do my studying for my Tuesday night class. I had to change textbooks first. We'd finished Volume One the week before, and were going to start in on Volume Two this time. They were standard textbooks. Dixon knew them well, the way I'd had the first one kicking around the place, on renewals, for about six weeks straight. I'd mentioned to him, I think, that we would be about ready to tackle Volume Two in another week's time, and I could remember his kidding answer: "My, my, you're getting to be a big boy now!" He probably thought this self-improvement stuff was the bunk.

On my way home from my job, I dropped off at the library, turned in Volume One, and picked up Volume Two. I holed up for the evening, rolled up my shirt sleeves, sat down at the table with pencil, blank paper and book in front of me, and got ready to cram improvement into my skull.

I didn't see it until I'd gotten well into the second theorem, and had to turn a page. Somebody'd been working out one of the problems on the margin of the page. People often did that, I'd noticed, with textbooks of this kind.

I thought I was seeing things. It was my own name, or part of it anyway, staring up at me from the page. *Red—call me from Mallam's ten sharp night you get this out.* Just a hurried pencil-scribble, as cramped as possible in order to be inconspicuous, but I recognized the writing. Dixon—the murderer. He must have slipped into the library sometime earlier in the day, located the reference book he knew I was sure to take out next, and taken a chance on contacting me in this way.

Well, that was his big mistake. I was fresh out of sympathy with lousy girl-killers.

I closed the book with a sound like a firecracker going off. I picked up the phone, hesitated, put it down again. No, Hiller and his side-kicks could come and get him from here, take up where they'd left off the night I'd so misguidedly abetted his escape. I'd bring him back to his original starting point unaided. That was the very least I could do in the way of making amends.

Mallam's was a big drugstore we both knew well and often patronized. He hadn't given any number, so how I was to call him I couldn't figure, but he'd mentioned an hour, ten sharp, so it behooved me to be at the right place at the right time and leave the method up to him.

The method was simple. I was hanging around by the cigarette counter

when the phone in the middle booth started to ring. The counterman started for it, but I stepped in ahead of him. "That's probably for me," I said.

It was. I knew his voice. He'd simply called me, instead of having me call him. "You saw it," he said.

"Yeah, I saw it." I tried to keep my voice neutral. I was still at his mercy; he could cut himself off.

"Are you alone there? Are you sure no one's following you or anything?"

"Dead sure," I said grimly.

"I gotta see you; I gotta know where I stand. It's not in the papers any more. You're the only friend I have, Red." Wrong tense, I thought to myself. "I don't know who else to turn to. I'm going crazy—and I'm strapped. I can't even get out of this place I'm in if I want to."

"I'll take care of that," I promised.

He said, speaking quickly probably to override his own misgivings: "Take the Laurel Avenue bus line, to the Whitegate part of town. Get off at Borough Lane stop. There's a rooming house there, 305, with a tailor shop below. Go up one flight. Harris is the name." Then he caught his breath, said: "And whatever you do, if you notice anyone following you—"

"They've given me up as a hopeless case long ago. Don't worry, everything'll be under control."

He hung up without waiting for any more. That was all right; now I had him.

HE LOOKED bad when he finally let me into the place. He looked like he hadn't slept decently since he'd left our

own place. It was a cheesy-looking little hole, about the best a guy wanted by the police could hope to get for himself. Judging by the litter, he'd been doing most of his eating out of cracker boxes and tomato cans, and smoking himself to death.

"Yeah, I brought some dough," I answered his question. I didn't bother passing it to him, because he wasn't going to need it anyway.

"Are they still hot for me?" he asked anxiously.

"I don't know. The last I saw Hiller was the day of the funeral, standing over in the shadows at the back of the church. I guess he was hoping that the —guy that did it would show up."

He took quick steps back and forth, raking at his hair. "It's not fair! I'm suddenly hunted down like a mad dog —for something I didn't do! Now there's only one guy left that's still willing to believe I didn't."

"No," I said, quietly but succinctly.

That brought him up short. His lips formed the question without sounding it.

"You better make that unanimous," I said. "What do you expect?"

He tottered backward, crumpled onto the sagging, unmade cot, reached down and gripped the edge of the mattress with one hand as if to steady himself. I went over the whole thing again, step by step, but as much for my own benefit as for his.

"I came back that night, and instead of taking it easy, reading like other nights, you were rushing around in there, as if you were straightening things up. I heard you through the door."

"Sure, I was pacing back and forth. You would be too if you'd just lost your girl."

"I knocked instead of using my key, and the knock frightened you. You only opened up a crack until you saw who it was."

"That was just a reflex. I didn't want to see anyone; I had too much on my mind."

"You told me you'd just put her in a taxi at the door. The sidewalk was wet, but the soles of your shoes were dry."

"Yes, that was an outright lie, but an innocent one. I didn't want you to think I was heel enough to let her go down by herself."

"You told me you heard her whistling up a cab; you let me lie to the cops about that. Her mother says she couldn't whistle a note."

He looked at me wide-eyed. "I didn't know that. I didn't know that."

The edges of my mouth curled. "She was your girl and you didn't know she couldn't whistle?"

"She never happened to tell me. And I heard *someone* whistle . . ."

"A little bird, no doubt." I went ahead: "You left me at twelve, to go down for a quick pick-up. McGinnis told me you didn't show up in his place until two. What were you doing before you went in there?"

"Walking around in the rain," he said dully, "like you do when you've lost something."

"Was this what you lost?" I gave the two raincoat fasteners I'd been carrying around on me all week a careless pitch over toward him. They landed on the cot beside him. "There was a third one,

that you overlooked. I stepped on it up at our place, while you were out that night 'walking around in the rain.' I put it on the table, and the next I knew it had disappeared . . . You hid it from that first cop that came around to question you."

HE LOWERED his head. "Yes, I did. She was already missing. It already looked bad enough for me. I was starting to get nervous by that time. When she was trying to leave, I'd tried to hang onto her, get her to stay, but not in a murderous way. She had to wrench her raincoat from my pleading grip, and the fasteners came off. I thought it might save me a lot of unnecessary trouble if that cop just didn't see that third one lying there on the table. Sure it was foolish to conceal it, but everyone does foolish things at times. Why should mine be made to count so heavily against me?"

"And then you threw the other two out the washroom window at McGinnis?"

"That was just a rebellious gesture. I'd lost her; I was hurt and bitter. I did that the way a man picks up a pebble or a stick and chuck's it away from him, as a vent to his inner feelings. And, Red, be logical; if I did it for concealment, why wouldn't I have done it sooner? The whole two hours I was roaming around in the rain, so why did I have to wait until I got in there?"

"Maybe you only recalled you had them on you after you got in there." I shook my head at him slowly. "It's no use, Dixon. Do you blame me, after all that, for thinking you did kill her?

Would you blame anyone for thinking it?"

"So you're going back to them now and tell them where I am. Tell them where they can come and find me."

I shook my head quietly.

"Then where are you going?"

"Just back to our place . . ." I looked him straight in the eye. "And you're coming with me."

"That's what you think!" His hand, the right one, had been clutching the mattress all this while. I'd mistakenly thought it was for balance, for moral support. He withdrew it now, and a gun came slithering out in its grip. He must have bought it in some pawnshop with the money I'd staked him to; he hadn't taken one with him the night he left. He pointed it square at me and said, lethally: "*You're never going to leave here alive again.* I can't afford it; I'm fighting for my life now. If it's got to be me or you, then it's going to be you. If you were my own blood-brother standing before me . . ."

I didn't know just when he was going to pull the trigger; he was going to any second, I could tell that just by looking at the expression in his eyes. The cot was a decrepit iron affair, one of those so-called portable things with legs that folded back under it. One hadn't been opened fully; it leaned in a little, letting the other three do most of the work for it.

I was sitting close enough to it, but that was the trouble—I was so close that any move my foot made was sure to catch his eye. I said, "All right, Johnny, let's have it and get it over with," and I clasped my hands at the nape of my

neck and leaned my head and shoulders back in the chair, as if at defiant ease. That attracted his dangerously twinkling eyes to the upper part of my body, and the very act of stretching backward from the waist up brought my legs unnoticeably further out in the opposite direction. I felt my shoe graze the cot support. I swung my foot out. Then I chopped it back. The support snapped up flat against the frame, and that corner of the cot came down with a crash.

The shot was jolted out of him by the sudden slide. It tore straight through at heart-level, but the shift-over carried it under my left armpit. I dove over on top of him before another one could come out, slapped the gun-hand down against the mattress, and ground my knees into it.

The beating I gave him brought the other cot support down, and we rolled down to the floor together, in a mixture of soiled sheets, gunsmoke and dust from the mattress. As he'd said, it was him or me, and he had a gun. I didn't pull my punches, although I don't usually hit a guy when he's down. But I don't usually fight murderers either.

I quit when he stopped fighting back, and pocketed the gun. He was out cold. No one seemed to have heard the shot, or if they did, it was the kind of a place where they believed in minding their own business.

I threw water in his face to revive him, and before his head had altogether cleared he was already down below on the street with me, rocky but standing on his own legs. I got him into a cab, and before he knew it I had him over at

our place, had closed the door on the two of us, and flung him back into his own favorite chair.

CHAPTER SIX

HE COWERED there, not saying anything, not moving. His eyes kept following me around, mutely pleading.

"Don't look at me like that," I told him finally, wincing from the touch of the iodine-stopper on my open knuckles. "D'you think this is fun for me? D'you think this is my idea of how we should wind up, you and me?" I picked up the phone.

He spoke, for the first and last time since we'd come away from the hideout. "Carr," he said "you're not human at all!"

"Gimme Police Headquarters," I said.

A whistle sounded somewhere under our windows. A woman's voice called: "Yoo-hoo! Taxi!" Then the whistle sounded again, a fine full-bodied thing a man needn't have been ashamed of.

I put the phone down, open the way it was, streaked across the room, threw the window up. I was just a minute too late. I could see the cab roof, but the whistler had just finished getting in. Her hand reached out, pulled the cab door to with a slam.

I emptied my lungs out. "Driver! Hey you down there! Hold it—stay where you are!"

He looked out and up at me. "I got a fare . . ."

I backed my lapel at him; all there was behind it was a little dust, but he couldn't tell from that distance. "Police

business!" I said warningly, and hauled my head in.

I put the phone together on the increasingly annoyed voice that was saying: "Police Headquarters! Who is this?" I changed the key around to the outside of the door and locked Dixon in behind me.

The woman in the cab was about thirty-six, very blonde. She stuck her head out at me inquiringly as I came skidding up to the cab door.

"D'y you live here in this house?" If she had, I'd never seen her before.

"Yeah, 2-C, second floor rear. I been a tenant here three weeks now."

"Last Monday night—that's a week ago tonight, near twelve, this same time—did you call a cab to this door by whistling for it like you did just now? It was raining . . ."

"Sure," she said readily. "I call a cab to the door every night, rain or shine, so I must've that night too. I do a specialty at 12:05 each night at the Carioca Club. Leonora, that's me. I imitate bird calls."

Then he'd told the truth! He *had* heard some one whistle for a cab; he *had* seen one standing below; he *had* just missed seeing her get in.

For some reason that made the whole thing look different. The same facts remained, but I saw them in a different light now. Not bathed in glaring suspicion anymore, but just as unfortunate coincidences that had damned him. Yes, even to his pitching the raincoat-fasteners through the washroom window. That became just a gesture of frustration, a reaction to having lost her, such as anyone might have made.

The blonde was saying: "Well, mister, I gotta go. I go on in about ten minutes. If I been disturbing people by whistling for a cab every night, I'll tone it down."

"No," I said gratefully, "you haven't disturbed anyone; you've saved a man's life. I want to see you when you get back from work . . . Carr, fourth floor front."

I WENT CHASING upstairs again. He hadn't tried to bust down the locked door.

"You're in the clear as far as I'm concerned," I flung at him abruptly when I came in.

He just looked at me dazedly; the change was too sudden for him.

"Hiller told me they've established that Estelle got as far as the landing below your door, and then someone jumped on her, stifled her cries, choked her senseless then and there. A moment later this Leonora, this professional performer, must have come out on her way to work, a landing below that. The girl wasn't dead yet, but the killer thought she was. He lost his head, thought he was trapped, carried her up past this floor to the incinerator closet on the floor above this. He actually killed her in there without knowing it. Meanwhile you'd heard the whistle from below, got to the window just too late, mistakenly thought you'd seen Estelle go off in a cab.

"The thing is, who was the guy? It wasn't just a stray, a loiterer. He would have waited until she got out into the dark street. There was no robbery motive, either; she didn't even have her handbag with her. It was some one who

knew her, someone who had followed her here to your place, who had been lurking around outside your door the whole time she was in there, who put the worst possible construction on her visit to you."

He nodded dismally. "She kept saying all the way through that she loved me. Even after she'd already opened the door and wrenched herself away from me by main force, she came back a step and kissed me good-by and said: 'Nobody can ever take your place, Johnny.'"

"Then the killer heard that; it only added fuel to his smoldering jealousy. He was too yellow to tackle you personally; he waited until you'd gone in, caught up with her on her way down, leaped on her in a jealous rage."

We didn't mention anyone's name; we didn't need to. I guess we both had the same name in mind. But knowing was one thing, proving it another. We were both stopped for awhile.

I paced around smoking like a chimney. He sat there biting his nails. He'd always been inclined to do that when he was keyed up. After awhile he noticed himself doing it, said mournfully: "I've back-slid. She'd broken me of this habit. Here I am doing it again because she's not around to see me." I didn't say anything. "That was the one thing I ever heard her say in his favor: 'Trem-holt never bites his; why do you have to bite yours?'"

I stopped short, whirled on him so suddenly, he edged away from me in the chair. "He doesn't, huh? I saw his hands when Hiller took me over there, and he practically had no nails left.

Then again, at the services, when he was nervous, he didn't bite them; he kept breaking matchsticks instead. Then why'd he bite them—or more likely file them down to the quick—right around the time Estelle met her death?"

While Dixon stared, I answered that myself: "Because he got something on them. Probably tar from that barrel of gravel on the roof. I wonder if we could get him on that?"

"How?" he said forlornly. "The nails are gone now—and the tar with them, if that's what it was."

"Maybe it wasn't that." Something else came to me. "Wait a minute! Didn't I hear the janitor say something about repainting those incinerator closets around that time? I think I met him in the hall a day or two before, lugging a brush and paint can around with him. I'm going up and take a look. You stay here."

I went up by myself and inspected the one she had been dragged into. It was just a little dug-out at the end of the hall. As you opened the door a light went on automatically, so the tenants could see where to dump their refuse.

It had been recently repainted. He'd done a pretty good job for an amateur. Light green. The important thing was, had the repainting been done before the killer dragged the girl in here or afterwards? If it had been done since, then obviously he couldn't have gotten fresh paint under his nails.

I took my own thumbnail to it and tested it by scraping a little nick in it. It was pretty fresh; that didn't look so good. He'd only given it one coat, and my nail dug through that and laid bare

the old coat beneath—a faded beige.

I looked up the janitor in the basement and asked him about it. He gave me the answer I'd been hoping he wouldn't.

"Naw, I didn't get to that one until after it happened. I'd gotten up as high as your floor the day of the murder, on Monday. I only had the one on the fifth left. He couldn't get into the one on the fourth floor with her because I'd locked it to keep the tenants out and give the paint a chance to dry. So he took her to the one above. I didn't get a chance to paint that until them cops were all finished with it, late Wednesday afternoon."

So whatever the reason was for his destroying his nails, it certainly wasn't because of fresh paint stains. The paint hadn't been applied until nearly forty-eight hours after Estelle Mitchell's death. Probably it was tar from the rim of the barrel he'd hidden the remains in. And as Dixon had said, as long as the nails were gone anyway, what good was that?

I WENT BACK to him in the flat, spread my hands dejectedly. And then suddenly, in the very act of giving up hope, a way occurred to me. I looked at him narrowly, said: "Can you tell me offhand what color the walls of that closet were before they were repainted?"

"No," he said. "When did I ever go in there?"

"See, and you live right here in the house. I couldn't have either, until I scraped below the top layer just now. I'm going to try to get him on that! It's just a trick, but it's about all we have

left now that can possibly help you."

He looked at me, puzzled.

"It was still beige the night it happened. But if this guy didn't go in there with her that night, he's not supposed to know that."

I was at the phone. He looked worried when he heard me say "Headquarters." I said: "Not you this time, Dixon." When I got through to Hiller, I just said: "Will you meet me at the Mitchell place? I've got something I want you to hear."

I left Dixon in the apartment, told him to lie low, not put on any lights. "Stay here now, will you? When I come back maybe I'll have good news for you."

Outside the Mitchell door I had to talk like a trooper to get Hiller to cooperate with me. His mind was already made up and he wasn't unmaking it, not for any murderer's roommate.

"I don't ask you to open your mouth and say a word. All I ask you to do is not contradict what you hear me say. Act as though it were official. And just listen to what he says. You're sure he wasn't allowed in that closet any time during the following day, while your men were working on it?"

"No one was."

"That's all I want you to remember."

I rang the bell. Tremholz came to the door, and the dick and I went in together. I was shaking, inside where it couldn't be detected. It was such a thread-like little thing to hang anything on. Hiller just looked inscrutable. Tremholz looked calm and self-possessed. His nails were starting to grow out again, I noticed. He wasn't a chronic biter.

He Looked Like Murder

The thing to do was to get him rattled. I built up to it carefully, increasing the tempo as I went along. My insinuations became broader every minute, until they'd crossed the line, became outright accusations.

"Sure it was you. We've all known that all along!" I was scared Hiller would butt in and contradict me, but he kept to the agreement.

"Yeah, I know you were supposed to be in your room here all evening. What does that amount to? Your room's down near the front door. Mrs. Mitchell's is all the way at the back of the hall. You have your own latch key. You could have slipped in and out unnoticed a dozen times over between the time she first saw you come in at eight and the time she knocked to tell you she was getting worried about the girl not returning!"

I figured he was ripe enough now. Outwardly he was still imperturbable. But he was idly shredding a paper folder of matches, and that was a give-away. I gave him the punch-line.

"And why did you feel you had to clip or file down your fingernails to the quick?" I didn't give him time to shock-absorb that one. "I'll tell you why, Hiller! Because he got *pale blue* paint under his nails from the incinerator closet where he dragged her!"

He was still calm, derisive. "Listen to that, will you? That's a good one. The incinerator closet wasn't even light blue in the first place. It was tan, so how could I?"

All Hiller said, very softly, almost purringly, was, "You weren't supposed to know that, baby boy."

It was nearly dawn by the time I got back for Dixon. "Come on," I said, "I've got to bring you down to Headquarters with me."

The old fright came back again, the fright that had done him so much damage.

"There's nothing to be afraid of any more," I insisted. "The thing's unravelling beautifully. They've had Tremholt down there with them for hours, and he's getting in deeper by the minute. His alibi wasn't worth a damn once they gave it a really good shaking. I promised to produce you, and you're coming with me. You can't be cleared by proxy, you know."

And on the way down there I couldn't resist remarking: "He may have had you darn near framed, but it wasn't him alone, don't forget."

"Who else was in it with him?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"You yourself. I never saw a guy help to frame himself like you did."

* * * *

I don't live with Dixon any more. I've moved out since. It's hard to explain just why. He didn't kill her. He did try to kill me, but it isn't that either. It's that—I don't know—he didn't handle himself right through the whole thing, from start to finish. He showed a little too much canary-color. I lost respect for him.

I run into him now and then, and we're on the best of terms, but we never prolong the encounters. We're never completely at ease. There's a self-consciousness between us. You don't want to be reminded of a murder every time you look at a guy.

♦♦♦

Two of Richard Sale's myriad preoccupations are represented below: ghosts and cameras. As a veteran writer of fantasy, Sale must have enjoyed smuggling an Irish ghost into a detective story. His interest in photography goes without saying; for some years now he has been a luminary of the camera kingdom of Hollywood, where he has collected kudos as co-author of "Mr. Belvidere Goes to College" and director of "Ticket to Tomahawk." For such a versatile fellow, a mere Banshee is no problem.

BANSHEE

by RICHARD SALE

INSPECTOR HARRY RENTANO dropped in at the studio one night when I was shooting a little boy with a lighted candle in his hand. I was about finished anyway when Rentano opened the door and walked in. But he got kind of a shock. The entire studio was dark, and there was only the kid with the flickering candle. "For heaven's sake," Rentano said mildly, "this place looks haunted."

"Next time," I said drily, "you knock and we'll turn on the lights. I'd hate to scare a big brave detective."

Rentano smiled. "All right," he said. "But you can't tell me that you're getting a picture of that kid and that candle without any other lighting."

I said, "I'm telling you just that, Harry. This is a new film I've got in the Leica. Ultra-Speed panchromatic, three times faster than regular supersensitive.

They're doing wonderful stuff in speeding up the films these days. With this new one there isn't much you can't get. Even a forty-watt bulb will give you enough light for a shot. It makes a fine medium for photo-evidence."

"Yeah," Rentano said absently. I could see he had something on his mind. "You going to be long, Candid?"

"I'm finished now," I said. "Sit it in a chair and I'll be right with you."

He sat down. I paid off the kid and turned up the lights. I put the film cartridge in the dark room and then I came out and lighted a cigarette and sat down. "Well, friend?"

"Where you been, Candid?" Rentano said. "I haven't seen you in a long time. Aren't you working for the *Chronicle* any more?"

"I quit the *Chronicle*," I said.

"Commercial stuff?"

"That's right." I stared at him. "Harry, you're getting fat and you're getting gray. I can see silver threads among the gold. And what in hell is on your mind? You look worried."

"I'm not worried," he said. "It's just a guy. He came in the office today and he gave me a song and dance. I thought he was a little goofy at first when he told me the thing, but then he said he could prove it with a picture he'd taken. It developed he was a candid camera addict. So he went home and brought back the picture, and it gave me kind of a turn. Only, I had to tell him that the Homicide Bureau couldn't do anything for him, and as a matter of fact, he didn't want the police department. What he needed was a spiritualist."

"Wait a minute," I said, sighing. "You're going on like an old biddy with a choice piece of gossip but you're not getting anywhere. I haven't the slightest idea of what you're talking about."

Rentano sighed too. He squeezed his bulk down into a chair and rubbed his forehead. "Hell," he breathed, "you can't blame me. It's a screwy setup if you ever heard one. So I'll begin at the beginning. In the first place, Candid, what is a banshee?"

I grinned. "Banshee? A banshee is an Irish ghost. But you're not in character, Harry. You're Italian. You wouldn't use banshee. That is reserved strictly for Irishmen like myself."

He looked at me, smiling faintly. "Do you believe in ghosts, Candid?"

"I'll answer that by saying I don't disbelieve in anything until it's proven otherwise. Is this a spook case?"

"It's a trifle more than that," said Rentano. "This guy today, LeRoy Adams, was a fresh young kid, about twenty-five years old, carrying one of those Argus cameras. He said there was a banshee loose and that it was his missing sister's spook out for revenge."

"That's a habit banshees have," I said. "They exist for revenge. In the old country, the legend is that a banshee will come back when a dead man has been wronged. The banshee will right the wrong and then disappear."

"Then this is a banshee," Harry Rentano replied, frowning. "The kid went on about it. His old man was being haunted by this damned thing and the kid said his sister had been missing and that this thing was her shade. But they only saw it once this night. . . . I dunno. I told him it sounded like so much malarkey to me, and he went home to get the picture he had taken of it."

"Now take it easy, Harry," I grinned. "You're not going to tell me he brought back a photo of the spook?"

"He did that little thing. This afternoon. I thought maybe it was one of your gags, but it wasn't. I told him I'd like to keep the photo for a couple of days and that I'd try to help him out."

"All right, but you still haven't told me anything. Where does the banshee hang out!"

Rentano took a deep breath. "In the Aquarium no less."

"The Aquarium! You mean the fish house!"

Rentano laughed. "Why be surprised? We've had murders in zoos, on ferry-boats, just about every human

place in this city. So why not a banshee in the Aquarium?"

I laughed. "It just seems funny. A ghost down there among a lot of fish. And what has LeRoy Adams got to do with the Aquarium?"

"His father—the old man's name is Harry Adams—is night watchman at the place. He takes charge when they close it up and he sticks around all night. Gloomy sort of job."

"I can imagine," I said. "Probably plays three-handed rummy with a penguin and a shark. Where do I come in, Harry?"

"I figured you might help me out. You're one of those cynical cusses who aren't bothered by ghosts. I wondered if you'd spend a night down there with me."

"Oh, hell, Harry," I said, "it's all a phony. Either they're really pulling your leg, or else some one has had indigestion at the wrong time. Don't waste a night in the spot. Forget it."

"That's what I thought," Rentano said. "That's the way I felt about the whole thing. But the kid came back and brought me the photograph. And then I began to take stock in it."

"Let's see the photo," I said. "It's probably a faked double-exposure."

HE HANDED me the shot which he took out of a manila envelope. It was an eight by ten on glossy and the enlarging job was sloppy. But that didn't change the picture any. I looked at it and felt a cold line of prickles march down my spine.

"Faked?" Rentano asked quietly.

I didn't answer. I looked at it close-

ly. It was a flashlight shot. The print took in nearly all of the penguin pool on the south side of the building. It was a shot from above, the second-floor balcony no doubt. You could see the penguins all crowded against one side of the pool, heads all turned to stare at something. Penguins don't pose for shots in the dark. That made it pretty real. On the other side of the pool was the banshee. It came up out of bubbling water, the same water in which the penguins stood. You could see the frothy bubbles easily. And up from that came this white-bodied wraith.

The wraith was real. It was real because it had turned whiter from the quick glare of the flash bulb which got the scene. The whiteness of a flash bulb gives a pallid, overbright light to the subject it hits. The penguins showed the brightness. The wraith showed it too.

You had the feeling that the wraith would have been gray ordinarily. But for all of that, the banshee was a work of art.

It was as ghastly as any spook you've ever dreamed about. It wasn't one of those things in a white sheet that goes around clinking chains and knocking on wood for spiritualists. This was ectoplasm, a shimmying welt of white stuff which slithered up out of the bubbling water of the penguin pool to form a figure, utterly transparent (you could see the albacore tank on the far wall beyond it right through its middle) yet with a curious breadth of body that was disturbing. It narrowed into nothing at its foot and spread into a pair of shoulders at its top. There was no head. The

head dissipated into thin black air. There were two arms, distorted and baroque things, misshapen and deformed and pretty horrible, with jagged ends and no break at any elbow. The thing had the damnable appearance of a bride without a head. It was a nasty bit and I couldn't repress a slight shiver.

"Faked?" Rentano asked again, more firmly.

And this time I answered tersely, "The McCoy."

"What is it?"

"Don't ask me. Let's find out."

"You mean you *will* spend the night down there with me?"

"I will." I got my Leica G out and swung it around me in its case, and then I took a carton of flash bulbs too. And I didn't forget to bring my Luger pistol, fully loaded.

But we drew a blank. No banshees showed up that night. And Harry Adams didn't show up either. Another keeper named George Billings had taken his place.

"Adams has the day trick for this week," Billings said. "We alternate each week. He'll be here in the morning."

We were tired and disappointed when the night was through. We didn't wait to see Adams when he arrived. We were disgusted.

The following afternoon, we saw that Billings had talked to some Park Row reporter and the whole story—written with biting humor—was in the evening papers. After that, Harry and I dropped the whole thing because we felt like a pair of damned fools and undoubtedly had been. We were to find

out later that Billings had been very smart indeed. . . .

ON FRIDAY night, the following week, I had a telephone call. I was out at the time, but Claire Crosman happened to be at the studio waiting for me and a dinner date, and she took the message. Claire Crosman is a model from the Frazer Agency and outside of being my favorite model, she's about my favorite girl too. So when I came in, she gave it to me.

"Jimmy LaSalle wants you to get in touch with him right away," Claire said.

I said, "What are you doing here?"

"Dinner, my frozen-faced Adonis," she replied tartly. "If you're not genteel enough to ask me, I just pursue. I haven't seen you in so long, I can't remember whether or not I used to work for you. Has business been bad, darling?"

"I've been shooting still-lifes," I snapped. "I could have used you at that."

"Don't be fresh," she said. "And you'd better call Jimmy back."

I looked dumb.

"Which Jimmy is this?"

"Jimmy LaSalle. The Silver Slipper club."

I tweaked her nose once more and sat down and picked up the handset. I called the Silver Slipper and asked for Jimmy LaSalle. He came on quickly after I told the other end that Candid Jones was calling.

"Hello, Irish," LaSalle said right off. "Busy tonight?"

"No," I said.

"How'd you like a piece of free dining and dancing?"

I told him I'd like it fine but what was the hooker?

"That'll come instead of a check," he said. "Drop in later then. I've got a job for you."

I didn't have to persuade Claire to join me, and ten p.m. found us at the Silver Slipper, eating a hearty dinner and taking in the miniature floor show. It was a clever show and I liked it. We were in the middle of it when some one else joined our table in the dark. I looked up and Jimmy LaSalle was smiling at me.

I said hello.

"Never mind the sweet amenities, Candid," he said, still smiling. "I have a feeling that some one is spotting us, low lights or not, so just look amused as though we were chatting."

"Consider me looking amused," I said, smiling. "What's on your mind, James?"

"One of my girls is missing," he said. "Will you find her for me?"

"What's her name?"

"Doris Appleton," he said. "There'll be a picture of her in your coat when you leave. I'm playing safe on this."

"Why?"

"I liked the dame, Candid. She's a cute kid. But I think she might have stuck her nose into something and that's why we may be spotted. It was known around here I liked the kid and whoever has got her will want to be careful."

"Girls go back to the farm sometimes," I said.

"Maybe so. Maybe in this case. But

maybe not. Do me the favor and prowl around a little, eh?"

"Why don't you call Rentano?"

LaSalle said. "I don't want cops all over the place, kid. And between you and me, I've got more faith in you than the Missing Persons Bureau. How about it?"

"I'll look around," I said. "Any ideas?"

"She was running around with a kid," he said. "I don't even know his name. And she was getting a rush from Conch Merrill. That's why the precautions. He's over at another table with one of his boys. He's watching me. Check him, eh?"

"I'll check him," I said. "You take it easy. If you hear from the dame, let me know."

"I'll do that," he said. "Watch your carcass."

"A little detail I never overlook," I said. And he left.

RENTANO CALLED me up next day and asked me to come down. He was in his office when I got there, and we both had cigarettes before he opened up. "This is the banshee case again," he said.

"Nix," I said. "Did you see what we got in the papers from that last shot at it?"

"I know, I know," he said. "But you said yourself that the photo was on the level and the darn thing has been bothering me. I suspected LeRoy Adams, the kid, and I put a tail on him, but nothing came of it. Then I put a tail on Harry Adams, his old man. That's the keeper at the Aquarium."

"Did you find anything?"

"What I found is screwy enough." Rentano frowned. "The old geezer has been visiting the morgue every day this week."

I didn't say anything for a moment.

"He goes in," and Harry Rentano, "and looks around. The first day he took a look at every woman stiff in the place. Since then he just asks if there are any new ones and then he ganders them. He doesn't bother with the male corpses. Murphy, at the morgue, says the guy gives him the willies. Just goes about it in a plodding sort of way and never finds the one he wants and goes away again until the next day."

"I'll say this," I replied. "We certainly have some lulus in this town."

Rentano said, "What's he looking for, Candid?"

"I don't know, Harry. Any more of the banshee?"

"I talked with LeRoy Adams, his son, and he says no. But—"

"Just that once then," I said. "That banshee haunted the Aquarium and those unsuspecting penguins just that one night when LeRoy Adams took the picture, eh?"

"Just that one."

"Well, that gives me a hunch," I said. "But it'll have to wait."

I was dozing in a chair at the studio that night when hell broke loose and the ball began to roll at last. A bunch of incidents can only keep piling up so long and then the break comes and you start to untangle the mess, sometimes without much trouble either. I was sitting there, half asleep and trying to come out of the inertia and get un-

dressed for bed when there was a racket of a pounding on my door and a woman crying sharply for me to let her in.

I jumped to my feet and opened the door and she flew in with the wind and cried, "Lock it! Lock it!" So I locked it.

She was pretty and she was pale. Her breath was coming short and hard, and she looked terrified. She had a startling figure and you could see it because she had a tight suit on and a sweater that was too small for her. She stared wildly, her eyes watery. But she was pretty. She was very pretty.

"I called Jim my LaSalle," she breathed huskily. "He said to come up here. He said you'd protect me. He said you wouldn't let them take me back."

I said, taking a guess in the dark, "So you're Doris Appleton."

"Yes."

"You got away?"

"They left me with Hymie. He fell asleep. I got past him and ran. He woke up and came after me. I think he's followed me here!"

"Who's Hymie?"

"I don't know his last name. I don't know any of them. I overheard them talking about something at the Silver Slipper one night last week. Something about a snatch. They'd stolen some boy and they were hiding him and waiting for his parents to pay off. They caught me overhearing them and they were going to kill me!"

"And what now?" I said. "You want me to go along with you to this spot where they're keeping the boy? You think we ought to rescue him? Where is the place?"

"It's up in Westchester," she replied quickly. "I don't know the address but I can find the house. I know I can find the house. I heard them describe it. It's in Mamaroneck on Wilder Lane or Wildwood Lane or something like that."

"All right," I said. "Just a second." I went to the telephone and called the Silver Slipper number and Jimmy LaSalle answered it immediately. I asked, "Jimmy, did Doris Appleton give you a buzz a few minutes ago?"

"Are you nuts?" he said. "I haven't heard a word."

"Thanks," I said. "I was wondering whether or not you'd given me the wrong picture. You'll hear from me." And I hung up.

I was staring at her the entire time and I saw her take the little gun out of her bag and level it at me while I was still talking. So I moved slowly because it's not smart to move fast when some one else has the gun. I said, "You see, lady? You're a phony. Jimmy LaSalle says you never called him and the gag is out the window."

"You're smart," she said. "They told me you were going to be smart. They said you were hard to fool."

"Oh, hell," I said. "I'm easy enough to fool. You're just a lousy actress."

"Don't move," she snapped as I started to get up. "Don't move from that chair."

"Why not?" I said. "The gag is floppo, so you can beat it back to the boys who sent you. What was the idea? Not to bump me off. No sense in that. I'm not even up on the business. Did you want me aside until the little plot

was finished and cleaned up? Afraid I know too much?"

"All right," she said. "They say you're a tough baby. You don't have to lay it on. You're afraid of this gun and you're not kidding me."

"I'm not half as much afraid of it as you are," I said evenly, half-closing my eyes and staring at her intently. "You see, lady, you never killed anyone in your life. And I think maybe you know that I've knocked off seven rats in my day. It takes a lot of nerve to shoot a man. You haven't got that nerve."

"Try me!" she blustered. "Try me and see!"

"Sure," I said. "I think I will."

She looked scared then, and she started to back up a little toward the door, and I got out of the chair and followed her quickly and without too much motion until I got close to her. "Stand back! You're crowding me!" she cried. "I'll shoot! I swear I'll shoot!"

AND THEN the telephone rang and it was a nice break. It damned near made her jump out of her skin. She jerked around and I lifted the rod out of her hand and slapped her once just to teach her to let guns alone.

She burst out in a fit of terror-stricken tears and fell into a chair while I answered the telephone. It was Harry Rentano. "Candid," he said, "can you hit the road?"

"What's happened?" I said tensely, because his voice was all raspy and I could tell he'd been shaken.

"A hell of a thing," he said. "Just a hell of a thing. It looks like we were really taken, boy. Somebody took us and

took us right. Two guys just knocked off old man Adams at the Aquarium."

"Adams?" I said. "The watchman? Harry Adams?"

"They got to him," Rentano said. "They put two slugs in his chest and he died fast, Candid. He's dead now. Can you meet me there right away?"

"You go ahead," I said. "If I can come I'll be there."

"That banshee thing," Rentano said. "What did that have to do with it? It's going to come up. The kid won't keep his mouth shut. He'll sell that photo to the rags and they'll make hay with it. How does that damned banshee tie in?"

"You go down," I said. "You look it over."

"It's all phony," he said. "Somebody tried to drag me out into the sticks with a phony case call. I checked with a different precinct and let them go, and they said there was no case at all. Somebody tried to get me occupied while they knocked off Adams."

"You and me both, Harry," I said. "But never mind that now. You go down there and find out. Did they get the guys?"

"They lammed. A cop wounded one of them. I'll tell you later."

"Right," I said, and I hung up.

The girl was staring at me now and she was white with fright. I put on my coat and hat and got my camera and my Luger. I turned a baby spot on her and took a quick candid of her just to have a shot in case I lost her and in case she turned out to be smarter than me. I took it so fast, she didn't know it was coming and she forgot to hide her face. I slipped her gun away then and turned

down the spot and I snapped, "What's your name, baby?"

"Guess it," she said hollowly.

"I'll let the D.A. do that," I said. "It's murder now. You get what I mean. Your friends knocked off the watchman of the Aquarium and it's murder. First-degree murder and you're an accomplice before the fact. Will you talk?"

"No," she said. "It's a lie and I don't know anything about it."

"All right then," I said, "let's go find Conch Merrill and his boys and we shall see what we shall see."

"You fool," she cried, "they'll—" and she stopped.

"Kill me?" I said. I shook my head and grinned. "Lady, a lot of people have tried that little trick and here I am all nice and alive. Let's blow, and keep your hair out of your eyes or you'll take one in the back yourself. Sometime remind me to show you a picture of what a Luger bullet does to a man when it hits him."

"Stop it!"

She shivered violently and I thought she was going to faint but she got a grip on herself and we faded.

I didn't try to cover us up because I wanted to be followed. I knew we were going to be followed. That much was a cinch. Conch Merrill wasn't going to take a chance on a girl like this. He'd send her to put the act on for me, to try and make me follow the good old red herring. But Conch Merrill wouldn't trust a dame like this to keep silent under pressure. I hadn't been an insurance flatfoot for thirteen years for nothing. Merrill had sent a guy with this girl to check up on her and give her an out.

Whoever the guy was, he'd follow along.

I shoved the girl in a cab and climbed in myself and said loudly, "Just drive!" and we moved off. Then I watched out of the rear window discreetly. Sure enough. A car down the block turned over its motor, brought up its headlights and came after us, tagging all the way.

We rode for ten minutes and then I stopped at a drug store to make a phone call. I took it easy, told the dame not to try and lam or I'd shoot. And then I went in.

I didn't make any phone call. I went in one door and out another around the corner like a flash. I circled back just in time to see the plug-ugly in the black car pull up alongside the cab. The girl got out quickly and jumped into his car. It was risky, but it was what I'd wanted. I hopped another cab, told him to tail them, and we moved off leaving my first driver at the store, waiting for me.

They felt pretty sure of themselves because they didn't waste any time but went uptown to East 76th Street and pulled up in front of a modern apartment house and parked. Another herring. They didn't go into the apartment house but up the steps of the brownstone next to it. They disappeared in the front door.

I paid off and watched the face of the house for lights. There were lights on the second and third floors. I figured this way. If the lights came on the first floor right away, there was the hideout. If they didn't, then the hideout was one of the other two floors, which narrowed it down somewhat, and the fact

that the lights were already on meant that other confederates were already there.

As I watched, the third floor lights went off. I liked that. I lay back in the shadows and kept a hard eye on the windows. A curtain moved suddenly and a white face peered around the side of it and swept the street, then disappeared.

That was it, all right. They felt they were home safe and now they were watching for cops to see if they had been followed.

When I could, I got away from there and telephoned Centre Street. I got hold of Detective Claghorn and told him to take Babcock and come up here and watch this house. I gave him a description of the guy and the gal and advised arrests if they tried to lam.

Then I left and took off for the Aquarium.

POOR RENTANO was having his troubles. There was honest sweat on his face and there was fatigue and the sand of two a.m. in his eyes, and he looked completely harassed. The lights in the Aquarium were all on when I arrived, and there were plenty of cops around the spot. It was a strange sight inside, the M.E. examining a corpse in a room surrounded by fish in dully lighted tanks, beside a pool where the little penguins, all decked out in natural full dress, crowded to one edge of their pool to satisfy their innate curiosity.

The dead man had two holes in his chest but neither of them was over the heart and it looked like he might have lived long enough to talk. Rentano in-

troduced me to the dead man's son, LeRoy Adams. He was an ordinary kid and he had a cheap camera around his neck but he wasn't taking pictures with it. His face was pasty with dismay.

"Have you got a lead on the thing?" I asked Harry.

He nodded. "This guy, Adams, was on duty tonight. He was up in the balcony by the office there when he heard a noise downstairs and he came out. He looked down and he saw two men by the penguin pool. He pulled out his rod and yelled at them, and they let him have it without taking any time. He fell down here from the balcony. It happened that the cop on the beat—where are you, Kennedy?"

"Right here, sir," Kennedy said. Kennedy was a big, two-hundred-pound patrolman.

"Kennedy heard the shots," Rentano continued, "and came lopping in. He said the two killers were still by the penguin pool. He threw down on them and they had a little gun fight. How's your arm?"

Kennedy said his arm was all right. He'd been wounded.

"And they got away?" I said.

"They got away."

"I shot one," Kennedy said. "I hit him high in the right shoulder. He was cussing all the time he ran. I'd have killed both of them but they got me in my gun arm and I had to drop the rod. But I saw the both of them."

Rentano nodded. "Dragnet out for them now. Good description of them, Candid. I think we'll nick 'em."

"Let's take a look at the penguin pool," I said.

"I looked," said Rentano. "Nothing besides penquins but water and sand and some rocks."

"We'll look again. Come on, Adams. I want your help too."

We went over to the penguin pool and I said to Adams. "You took the photo of the banshee that night. Exactly where did you see it?"

Adams leaned over the railing and pointed. "Right there. The water was bubbling and it came right out of the bubbles. It was a rotten thing to look at. It really scared us."

"Is it all right if we share the pool with the penguins for a minute?"

Adams looked at me and frowned. "Get in it, you mean?"

"There's a pair of boots," Rentano said. "Right over there by the entrance. You can use those."

"All right," I said.

I got the boots and put them on. And then I climbed into the tank. The water only came up half way between my thigh and hip. The penguins didn't mind me at all. Most of them went over to the other side of the pool, but one curious little guy stayed right with me, almost at my knee, to see what he could see.

Rentano got me a hook and I began to fish with it. It was something like a boat-hook but not as long a pole. Adams pointed out the spot. I shoved it down under the rocks and for a long time I didn't feel anything. Then Rentano shot the spot of his flashlight down into the water. I told him to put the glass end just under, which he did, and it illuminated the whole half of the tank and I saw what I was looking for and our

troubles were over. I had a catch.

I fished down and brought up the brief case. It was a black leather thing and it was soaking wet, of course. I handed it to Harry and I stepped out of the tank. I said, "Here's your banshee and a whole lot more. Open up, Harry, and see what it is."

He opened it up and we dumped the contents out. There was an oblong package wrapped in watertight oilskins. These proved to be a wad of securities, negotiable securities at that, valued at sixty-five thousand dollars. The rest of the brief case disclosed a bag in which was a small carton that had soaked itself wide open. It had held ice cream that was gone now.

"I'll be damned," said Rentano. "Ice cream and mazuma. If that doesn't beat hell."

"We don't want any more than that," I said. "Let's go get them now."

"Fine," said Harry. "But where are they?"

"That," I said, "you will see within fifteen minutes. And just keep remembering, Harry, that one of your descriptions fits a guy named George Billings who alternates here with Harry Adams as watchman. Check? We're sliding in to home plate and you don't even know it. Let's blow. You and I. We won't need more. Claghorn and Babcock are already there."

I THINK THEY'RE fixing to blow," Detective Claghorn told us a few minutes later when we arrived. "Some activity up there. The lights came back on, and they keep peering out now and then. Their wind is up. I know they

haven't seen us but they're getting scared. What is it?"

"Banditry and murder," I said. "Do you know how many?"

"Seems like there's three different men," Claghorn said. "I didn't see the woman you spoke of."

"What the hell is this?" Rentano asked.

"Harry," I said, "get a load of this: Conch Merrill and a sidekick have worked hand in glove with George Billings on this one. I don't know the machinations but we'll find that out. Harry Adams was knocked off only because he interrupted two of them when they were trying to recover the loot where they had hidden it. A gal named Doris Appleton, who works for Jimmy LaSalle, has been snatched by Merrill and kept in hiding because she overheard something she wasn't supposed to. She may be dead but I don't think so. I think they'll plan to kill her now, though, because it's more than robbery they have to elude. It's murder. She's in that house."

"Watch it," said Claghorn. "They've got one guy—an ugly cuss—guarding in the vestibule there."

"He's the guy who followed me," I said, and explained.

Rentano looked stumped. "We can't storm that hole, Candid. We're liable to get shot up, but more than that, they're liable to get panicky and kill Doris Appleton."

"Give me a police whistle," I said. He handed me one.

"What now?"

"I'm going in the back way," I said. "There's a fire escape the back way.

I'll go up and try and find that girl first. When I do, or if I get caught, I'll blow on this whistle and then you take them. Right?"

"It sounds dangerous," Rentano said.

"Sure," I said. "Sure. It is dangerous. What the hell else can we do?"

"Okay," he said. "Let's take them."

I left them, kept close to the apartment house wall and then went in the apartment house itself. I told the doorman where to head in, then went into the cellar and out into the back. I found the yard of the brownstone and got into it over a fence. I guessed right. There were fire escapes in the rear and easy to reach. I took a long look to make sure no one was sitting at the top with a rod already to go, and then I started climbing.

I went up as quiet as a mouse and I realized I was sweating and had a tight feeling in my stomach. It's like that. It always will be like that. If you're human, you never will get used to the idea that in a few minutes you're going to come face to face with a guy and a gun. You know that guy is out for your life and you know how quick a slug can stop that life. It's you or he, and you know it. It makes your gun hand go damp and grip the Luger tight as a drum.

I found Doris Appleton easily.

She was in the back room and it opened right onto the fire escape. She was on a bed, her arms and legs each tied separately to the four corners. She had a two inch piece of adhesive over her mouth.

Her guard was the other dame—the pretty who had tried to red-herring me

an hour or so before. She was standing there, looking out the door into the hall. She was plenty nervous. She was holding a big rod, a .45 which one of the guys had given to her, and she acted afraid of it.

It was a cinch setup but for one thing. The window was closed. I couldn't open it to get in; she'd blast me sure. I couldn't knock a pane out, or the guys in the front room would hear it.

So I figured the dame with the gun for a rank amateur and I pulled a sandy on her. I took a flower pot off the fire escape and dropped it down into the yard. It made a sucking plop when it hit and it sounded faraway, but she heard it and turned her head to the window. It was the effect I wanted. She thought some one was in the yard below.

She came over and opened the window while I clung to the wall outside. She cautiously eased her head over the sill and peered down, trying to spot the cause of the sound.

I walloped her on the skull with the Luger barrel and she never even grunted. Just fell on the sill there like a baby.

I took the .45 from her and climbed in. There wasn't a sound. Keeping an eye on the door. I went to the bed and stripped the tape from Doris Appleton's mouth and said, "Quiet! Police!"

She couldn't talk, she was so damned glad to see me.

I got out a knife and cut her ropes and told her to hug the wall in a close-hauled corner out of line of fire from the door. She just made it. She got in the corner and I'd turned around to make a little forage when Billings came in.

I'll say this: he was more surprised than I was. He stood there in the doorway and his mouth fell down on his chest. He had his left arm in a sling that also bound up his shoulder. In his right hand, he held a Colt .38 pistol. His eyes, watery and huge, nearly popped out of their sockets. He went white.

Finally he found his voice, a shrill tinny scream of warning which buzzed in my ears as he called, "*Conch!*"

He threw his gun on me instinctively and I didn't take any chances but let him have a bullet in the belly. He looked surprised when it hit him and he sat down with a bang. His gun went off. He didn't fire it at me; it just went off from the shock. His bullet furrowed the floor. He sat there, dropping the gun and put his good hand over the bullet hole in his stomach and stared at it stupidly.

I heard a machine gun start to chatter in the front room and I guessed then that Rentano and the others had heard the firing and were breaking in. I was right. The plug-ugly in the downstairs hall was coming up the stairs, crying at the top of his lungs, "Lam, it's the cops, lam!"

I saw him coming up the stairs and I went over and fired four shots down it with the .45 I'd taken from the konked dame. The plug-ugly looked as shocked as he'd ever looked in his life and turned and hightailed back down those stairs.

But I didn't have time to laugh at the plug-ugly then. I suddenly realized that the machine gun had stopped. I turned around toward the front room and had a quick hunch and ducked to my knees

as a burst of bullets slapped into the wall over my head. There was a lot of smoke and Conch Merrill must have thought he downed me, for he dropped the muzzle of the gun. I started firing with both the rods I had in my hands.

I hit him twice, in both legs. He started screaming with pain and terror. When I reached him he had thrown the machine gun aside and was sitting in the hall, holding his legs.

It was all over but the shouting.

DORIS APPLETON gave us a surprise when we got her down to Headquarters with the living rats. She took one look at LeRoy Adams and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Rentano and I were surprised, but LeRoy Adams said, "It's all right, she's my sister."

"Your sister?" I said. "What the hell is this?"

"Her name is Appleton," Rentano said.

"That's just a stage name," said Adams. "Pop didn't want Doris to be a showgirl, so she changed her name. She was working at the Silver Slipper. We thought maybe she was dead. They might have killed her and it was my fault."

"I don't get this," Rentano said.

"She was missing," said Adams. "Remember when I told you? You thought it was all a gag. But I made a mistake. I shouldn't have told you. Pop explained later. He had a letter from Doris saying that she was being held a prisoner and that if he played along and didn't tell the cops, she would be returned. I didn't know about the letter and I told

you. It just happened you didn't do anything about it. But Pop thought that the guys holding her had found out about me getting in touch with the cops. He thought they'd kill her."

"Hell!" Rentano said. "That's why he went to the morgue every day."

"That's right," said Adams. "You're lucky, Sis. You're luckier than Pop was."

Next day we checked with a larceny squad and sure enough a bank messenger had been held up, slugged, and robbed, and sixty-five thousand dollars worth of securities lifted from him. The thing had happened in Battery Park no less. Right under the nose of the cops.

Then Doris Appleton did a lot of explaining. She'd seen George Billings at the Silver Slipper one night and got suspicious. She followed him, saw him meet Conch Merrill and Feather Thompson (the plug-ugly) and she got an earful of the setup.

Billings knew this bank messenger kid. The kid used to eat his lunch at the Aquarium and look at the fish. The kid talked. Billings saw a nice heist of sixty-five grand. He got in touch with Merrill, and they pulled it. They took the stuff, wrapped it in oils, and sunk it in the penguin pool because it was hot and because it was a quick hide-out for the stuff.

But they'd caught Doris and he'd been held prisoner the whole time. She said they were going to knock her off that night and lam. They were waiting for their nerve. The only trouble was that we got there before their nerve.

We got in touch with the bank messenger then and he gave us his version

of the holdup. I asked him what the ice cream was doing in the brief case, and he said one of the girls in the office had asked him to get some for her and he'd stopped on the way and picked it up. He'd had it packed with dry ice to make it last. I began to get the picture.

"But, hell," Harry Rentano said to me later, "this still doesn't explain that Irish ghost, that damned banshee!"

"Listen, you simpleton," I said, "if you'll get two plates, two spoons, and a bucket of water, I'll show you."

I went out and got a quart of chocolate and vanilla and had them dry-ice pack it. Then I came back and opened the thing up.

"Are you watching?" I said. He nodded. "Presto—a spook!" And I dropped the dry ice into the water.

It began to bubble and froth instantly and a thick white smoke curled from it in as ghostly a shape as you ever saw. Only this time it didn't look horrible because it was taking place in broad daylight and not in semi-darkness, and it was also taking place in police headquarters instead of a gloomy Aquarium, and it was being seen by a cynic instead of a frightened old man.

"Dry ice," I said drily, "and water. Guaranteed to produce one genuine banshee which will even pose for pictures and frighten penguins. The kid just happened to be there right after it was thrown in the pool."

"I'll be horn-swoggled," Rentano said. "Will you have chocolate or vanilla?" I asked, dishing out the ice cream.

Rentano said, "Who me?" and he sighed. "All right, all right, Candid. I'll take vanilla." ♦♦♦

If there's a type of story extant that Robert Turner hasn't tried and conquered, we're not sure it's worth knowing. He seems equally at ease writing detective, sports and love stories, as well as short-shorts for Colliers' exacting market. Here, in a small gem that probes the emotional impact of an accidental shooting with definite overtones of crime, he turns his talents to the type we personally consider his forte.

For the Rest of Your Death

by ROBERT TURNER

CAREWE WAS taking this well. Everybody told him so. He was being the original stout fella, with stiff upper lip, chin up and all that sort of clabber. They didn't even question the fact that his right fist was bandaged. One of the kids had slammed the car door on it, he'd said. He hadn't told them that he'd deliberately smashed it against the wall of the garage right after this thing had happened. It hadn't seemed to be anybody's business.

He was alone in his study, now. The funeral had been this afternoon. It was all over now. Jinny was not only dead but buried. Gone. A real gone gal, as his son Will would say in the vernacular of the teen-ager. Gone but not forgotten.

He had come up here to get drunk and break down and do whatever else was necessary to purge his system. The

study was sound-proofed and he had locked the door. But now that the time was here, he was finding it a difficult thing to let go after holding on so grimly the last couple of days.

He stood in front of the mantel mirror, with a long-stemmed cocktail glass in his hand, filled with straight bourbon. It was his third. It should have been tying one on him by now, but it wasn't. He toasted himself in the mirror, a big, rawboned man, with shaggy, iron-gray hair and a sternly carved face.

"You look the part, Carewe," he told himself. "You look like the type who would work himself up from a beat policeman to police commissioner of one of America's biggest industrial cities. Jinny even told you so. Drink up, hero. Drink to Jinny! And to you!"

Jinny. Tall without looking tall, and slender. Willowy, some called her, but

that was hardly the word for Jinny. Twenty years married to a mugg like him, fighting beside him every inch of the way up the long, rugged road and hardly showing a line in her face. With the softest smile he'd ever seen on a woman's face. With a disposition that made the kids, and everybody else, worship her. With a mature beauty that made men turn their heads when they walked into a restaurant on their rare nights out.

That was the trouble, he realized now; those nights out had been too rare. He had been so obsessed with climbing to the top and staying there that he'd forgotten that Jinny was a woman. That dressing up and going out and having a man being romantically attentive can be like life blood to a woman.

He had sworn that he'd never let himself think about the other night. He would forget it. That was the object of this private little binge. Yet he found himself thinking about the thing that had happened, going over it and over it in his mind, every little horrible fine point of it.

It had been here in the study that it happened. The Burkaw papers had been in the wall safe. The papers, mostly bookkeeping records and debt notes, had been impounded that day in a flash raid on Jimmy Burkaw's headquarters. Burkaw was the bookmaking king of the city, the county, the state—some said the whole country. Carewe and the D. A., Smithers, had been going over the papers late that night. Nobody knew they were in Carewe's house. They were supposed to be in a vault at City Hall. Nobody but he and Smithers and Jinny

knew they were here at his home.

What awakened Carewe just before dawn, he'd never know. He wanted a cigarette and he'd left them down here in the study. He came down to get them and he'd caught somebody rifling the wall safe by flashlight with a cloth wrapped around it to dim it. The light was so dull that he couldn't see the face of the marauder. All he saw was that a pair of hands were holding the light and quickly shuffling the papers, and that the figure was wearing light-colored slacks.

He remembered, now, the hundreds of times when he'd seen the unfairness of circumstantial evidence. Of all people, he knew that things were not always as they looked. But he hadn't thought about that then. He'd gone swiftly, padding on silent bare feet, back to his bedroom and gotten the automatic from the drawer in the dresser. He hadn't awakened Jinny, hadn't wanted to frighten her. He'd come back down here to the study.

A board had creaked under his feet. The figure by the wall safe had wheeled around with a frightened gasp, and in the second before the muffled flashlight was dropped, Carewe saw the unmistakable glint of a nickel-plated revolver. His policeman's instinct to shoot first and ask questions later asserted itself. As long as he lived, he would never forget the door-slammimg sound of the shot, the fire-flash from the weapon in his fist.

When he snapped on the wall light, the figure huddled by the safe wasn't a man in slacks, wasn't one of Burkaw's hooligans come to steal vital evidence

against his boss. It was Carewe's wife, Jinny, wearing her tan lounging pajamas.

How long he stood there looking down at her, numbed, sick, a man suddenly scooped hollow of everything that was in him, he didn't know. But when he once again started to think, faint gray dawn was easing like a wraith through the windows. He only had to look at the way Jinny had fallen to know that she was dead. Dead by his gun; dead by his hand. The question kept scurrying around in stupid, dizzying circles through his mind, like a panicked, trapped rat: What was she doing here? Why had Jinny come down while he was asleep, to go through the Burkaw papers?

Smithers, the D. A., who had stayed over so that they could start right in again the next morning to go over the papers, came downstairs from the guest room, awakened by the sound of the shot. Smithers saw what had happened and, reluctantly, he gave Carewe the answers to the questions in his mind.

"You might as well know now," Smithers said bluntly. "She was seeing Burkaw, last winter, while you were at that police convention in Florida. A few of us in town knew it but we thought it best to keep it from you."

He stared at Smithers in slack-mouthed stupefaction. "Jinny?" he said. "Jinny and Burkaw?"

Smithers nodded.

They figured it out between them. Burkaw must have had something, some evidence, that he could hold over her. He'd used it to make her get certain of those papers for him. That was

all. A simple thing, once you could get used to the terrible idea of Jinny and Burkaw together.

It had been Smithers' idea to hold back the truth to protect the children and Jinny's name. Carewe had gone along with it. They had cooked up the story for the newspapers between them. Mrs. Carewe, they said, had caught a prowler at the safe, frightened him away. She had been going through the papers to see if anything was missing when her husband came down and found her there. In the dark, he'd made a mistake. It was one of those things, a tragic accident.

Smithers had said that he could take care of Burkaw, shut him up. It had all come off all right. Nobody had known—or even suspected—the truth.

Nobody except Carewe himself. And that was the bad part. He thought that probably he could have taken the other, Jinny's being dead. It was the knowledge of her and Burkaw and that she would sneak around like a thief in the night to betray her husband that shattered him.

What was the matter with her, Carewe asked himself. Didn't she know that she could have come to him, and that he would have forgiven her, seen her through the thing? What kind of a man did she think he was?

THE KNOCK on the door came then. At first he didn't answer it. He finished his drink, waited for the knocking to stop, for the servant or whoever it was to go away. But the rapping became more insistent and he finally had to unlock the door. It was Smithers.

Smithers, young, handsome, ambitious, a man who was going far and fast in politics, a man with the same ruthless set to his jaw that Carewe had when he was that age.

"Sorry to disturb you," Smithers said. "Something's come up."

Carew shrugged. "Come in." He let the other man pass him into the room, and he shut and locked the door again. He poured Smithers a drink, handed it to him, watched the other man's intense features as he drank. "What is it?" he said. "What's come up?"

Smithers set the drink down, put his hands into the side pockets of his sport jacket. He took a deep breath, tilted up his jaw, put his level, cold gray eyes hard on Carewe's. "I've got bad news," he said. "The whole thing's blown up in our faces. The story's out."

Carewe felt the blood go from his face. "About Jinny and Burkaw?" he said. "How could it? How in hell could it?"

Smithers smiled, showing all of his perfect teeth—the smile that showed up so well in the newspaper pictures. But it was only a smile of the mouth. Smithers' eyes weren't in on it. Very softly he said: "Because I gave it out. I called them and told them the truth of the whole thing. And then I told them that you couldn't face it any longer, that you'd written a statement and left it for me and then blown your brains out."

Carewe looked at Smithers as though he was a stranger who had been jabbering at him in double-talk. He said: "You *what*?" Then he saw Smithers' hand come out of his jacket pocket,

holding Carewe's automatic, the weapon that had killed Jinny.

Smithers said: "The newspaper people will be here soon. There isn't much time." He backed two steps away from Carewe, keeping the automatic trained on him. "The other night the thing actually happened the way we told it. There *was* a prowler and Jinny *did* frighten him away. I was the prowler. You understand? What actually happened was the story you thought we cooked up. Jinny wasn't robbing the safe; I was."

Carewe blinked at him. He didn't try to speak. He knew he couldn't.

"You're seeing Burkaw tomorrow," Smithers said. "I was afraid that you'd let something out, that you would soon see that my story about Jinny and Burkaw was a lie. I couldn't take a chance on that. You see?"

Carewe saw. When he nodded his head in affirmation, it felt as though it would fall from his shoulders. He managed: "What were you after in the safe? Why were you messing with those papers?"

"You're not very bright." Smithers smiled smugly. "Burkaw is a big gun. He's filthy rich and has a lot of high-powered connections. There were some documents in his records that you passed over lightly, as not having any definite bearing on the immediate charges against him. I spotted them as being items that Burkaw would go to any extreme to keep from being made public. I wanted them. Those papers would be a big help to an up-and-coming young politician. But of course you wouldn't know about such things,

Carewe. Rock - of - Gibralter, Honest John Carewe!"

"I see," Carewe said. One fact began to isolate itself, and it brought some of the life back into Carewe's great gaunt figure. Jinny was innocent. She was still dead, but she had died with honor. Jinny hadn't let him down. She hadn't ripped the skids out from under him.

Carewe watched Smithers take a typewritten letter from his pocket. Smithers said: "Will you sign this for me, Carewe, or shall I have to forge it?" He shrugged. "It won't make much difference. If the signature looks strange, it will just be that you were upset. A man is always upset just before he kills himself."

Faintly, through the soundproofed room, came the thin wail of a siren. Smithers tightened all over.

Carewe shrugged. "All right," he said. He managed a faint, cynical grin. "Why should I make it any more difficult for you, Smithers?" He moved around behind his desk. "Give me the thing. I'll sign it."

Smithers stood a respectful distance from the desk and tossed the typewritten letter in front of Carewe. Carewe had a little difficulty, with his bandaged right hand, dipping the pen into the marble holder desk set. It took his left hand to steady the thing. Then it seemed that the ink was low in the well and he had to tip it to fill the pen. He tipped it toward Smithers, and with one great effort flung the heavy desk set, ink and all, at Smithers' face.

Carewe threw himself over the top of the desk at almost the same instant. He slammed the automatic out of

Smithers' grip just as it went off. The thunder of it rang in his eardrums. He got his hands on Smithers, felt him struggling against him.⁹ It became elemental then. Because of Smithers, Jinny was dead; because of Smithers and his dirty, ruthless ambition. For the first time in his life Carewe wanted to kill. . . .

It was the terrible pain in his injured hand that finally brought him to his senses. The film over his eyes cleared away. He saw that he had been holding Smithers by the jacket front with his good hand and smashing Smithers' handsome face with his bad hand. He'd ripped the bandage loose, and the pain was almost more than he could stand.

Smithers was unconscious. Carewe turned his left hand loose and let the D. A. crumple to the floor.

Carewe shook himself all over like a giant mastiff and turned and moved toward the door. When he opened it, several reporters and two uniformed cops were hurrying down the hall. They all stared at Carewe as though he were a ghost.

"We—uh—heard there was some trouble here, Commissioner."

"Yes," Carewe said. "Quite some trouble. Mr. Smithers will tell you all about it, when he's able to talk."

He let them in past him, watched them stare stupidly at Smithers on the floor. While he told them the whole story, he went to work on the bourbon.

Strangely, this time it seemed to take hold. He knew that now he was going to be able to get roaring drunk. And he knew that Jinny would have approved.

♦♦♦

The challenge of building a story about a particular saying or jingle must be hard for a detective writer to resist. Agatha Christie did it, and very masterfully, too, with Ten Little Indians in "And Then There Were None." Here, in his own competent fashion, Robert Arthur weaves a tale around the favorite joke of his little country-doctor hero, who finds that the answer to his riddle is his only lease on life.

The Coroner's Hand

by ROBERT ARTHUR

JEFF BRIGHAM saw the last of his chips being swept across the table to swell Sheriff Andy Hicks' winnings, and groaned dismally. Sheriff Hicks grinned amiably across at the weather-beaten little medico who for thirty years had been coroner of Cochine County, as well as the only M.D. in some fifteen hundred square miles of desert and mountain.

"Too bad, doc," he rumbled. "Dunno what makes you keep on thinking you can play poker. You just can't bluff, that's the trouble."

"Bluff!" Doc Brigham snorted, and pushed back his chair with a scraping of wood against wood. "Bluff, you old walrus! I can bluff all right. You mean I never learned how to cheat."

The sheriff grinned without offense, and Joe Colfax, his lanky, buck-toothed deputy, chuckled. Doctor Jeff Brigham yawned, and for a second his alert, pale blue eyes closed wearily.

"Got to be getting back to my shack,"

he mumbled. "Nick Jacobs is sure to be calling me before morning to come tend to his missus, and that's eighteen miles of tough driving in any man's flivver. Surprised he hasn't called already. I'm a little worried about this one, and told him to call me in plenty of time. But maybe the stork's taking it easy."

He yawned again and reached down his battered hat from a hook.

"Next time," he told them, "I'll skin you galoots if I have to deal myself à coroner's hand to do it. Watch and see."

The sheriff turned away to hide a grin, but Andy Colfax sat up and bit, as he was supposed to do. It was Jeff Brigham's favorite gag, and the sheriff had seen him pull it a dozen times. But it was always good for another laugh when the doc could find someone who hadn't heard it before.

"What," Joe Colfax wanted to know, "is a coroner's hand? I've heard of the dead man's hand, the hand of fate, the

glad hand, and hands across the sea. But I'm damned if I ever heard of the coroner's hand."

Doc Brigham exchanged a hidden wink with Andy Hicks and settled his floppy hat leisurely on his graying head.

"Well, Joe," he said innocently, "it got its name like this. A Chinaman, a gambler, and a coroner were playing poker. The Chinaman held four aces, the gambler had a royal flush, and between them they pushed the pot up until every cent any of 'em had was in it. But in the end, the coroner won it. Now the question is, what did he hold?"

Joe Colfax wrinkled his brow.

"It ain't possible," he said. "There's nothing the other guy coulda held that woulda won over four aces or a royal flush. I'm willing to bet on it."

Jeff blinked at him.

"Now, Joe," he said mildly, "don't you think maybe you're being hasty? You don't mean you actually want to bet money on it, do you?"

"I sure do," the deputy said promptly. "I been playing poker for fifteen years and I never yet seen anybody hold anything to beat a royal flush. I got twenty dollars here says it ain't possible."

Jeff Brigham clucked his tongue against his teeth deprecatingly.

"Joe," he said, "you make it pretty hard for me to back out. So I guess it's a bet. You sure you understand, now."

Then, as if it had been waiting for its cue to interrupt him, the radio on the dresser broke off the series of reedy dance tunes it had been screeching out to bring in a bulletin from the little station in the state capitol, eighty miles east.

"Special news bulletin," a man's voice announced. "All peace officers, attention! You are warned to be on the lookout for two men in a new Monach sedan, black, bearing the license plates Z31579.

"The men are described as being Louis Chang, thirty, of mixed white and Chinese blood, five feet ten inches tall, weight about a hundred and thirty, hair black, complexion sallow, passes for a white man; and his companion, Henry 'Bobo' Bronson.

"Bronson is described as being six feet tall, weight about two hundred pounds, blond, with a round face and blank expression, mentally slow, has a habit of asking many questions.

"Both men are gamblers, and are described by the authorities as dangerous. They are wanted by police for the fatal stabbing of John Wilson, thirty-two, a construction worker on the Granite Valley dam project.

"The police say that Wilson was stabbed following an altercation over a poker game in a saloon just outside the Granite Valley district. The two men made their escape in the stolen car, and are believed to have headed east.

"The crime is believed to have occurred at approximately ten-thirty tonight. Wilson was unconscious when found, and only revived in the State Hospital, a few minutes ago, long enough to describe his assailants to the police before dying.

"Please be on the lookout for this car and these men, and apprehend them, dead or alive. You are warned again that these men are dangerous and probably armed."

THE VOICE, so smooth, so impersonal, like an educated machine telling of violence and death in which it had no remote concern, ceased; and the music returned to disturb the night silence. Automatically as he got up and reached for his hat and holster, Sheriff Hicks looked at the old clock on the dresser.

"Midnight," he said. "That means they had an hour and a half start. If they went east, they crossed the state line long ago. It ain't reasonable to suppose they went in any other direction, because west of Granite Valley and the capitol there's only three roads running through to the line."

"But I guess you and me, Joe, had better sling barriers across the road up at the top of the hill and set out lanterns, then lie doggo in the brush. If they did choose to come this way, they're still coming and we'll be ready for 'em. We know they ain't gone past yet, because if they had we'd have heard their motor, and there ain't been a car go past in the last hour."

The bet was forgotten. Joe Colfax groaned and reached for his boots. Doc Brigham was about to say something sympathetic when the sheriff's phone began ringing—a long and a short, a long and short.

The sheriff expelled his breath in a snort and picked up the receiver. Then he jerked his head at the little bow-legged desert doctor.

"You, doc," he said. "Operator's been trying to locate you. Nick Jacobs asked her to tell you to hustle out to his ranch fast as you could when you got the message. There's a flutter of wings overhead and he thinks it's the

stork circling around for a landing."

Jeff Brigham looked around for his bag, and swore gently as he saw he had not brought it with him.

"Have to be hustling," he said. "Got to go back to my shack for my kit. Looks like we'll both be up all night, Andy: you waiting for death to come by, and me for life. Well, g'night, I'm on my way."

He went out into the cool dark silence where his old jalopy was waiting and a minute later was rolling down the long hill.

Cochino City, all seventeen buildings of it, was dark and quiet as he drifted through toward his own residence, which was a little two-room-and-lean-to bachelor shack around a bend west of the community.

It was a dark night, the stars overhead obscured, but the air was sharp and clean with the smell of mesquite. Jeff Brigham took a deep breath, and was reminded by the bark of coyote off in the distance that the hunting season would open in a few weeks.

He pulled up in front of the shack and got out, grumbling mildly to himself as old men do.

Maybe it was thinking of the hunting he was going to do, and maybe it was because part of his mind was already eighteen miles away, at Nick Jacobs' ranch, that made him unaware of the waiting men when he opened the screen door and stepped into the pitch blackness of his shack. The first that Jeff Brigham knew of his unexpected and unwelcome visitors was the hard object that nuzzled him in the side.

A voice, like the slither of a snake

across wet sand, whispered: "No noise, doc. And no sudden movement. My trigger finger's jumpy."

Doc Brigham stood quite still. It took no special intuition to guess his midnight callers were the two men the radio had just finished warning against.

He stood still, and the overhead light snapped on to illuminate the small living room crowded with an old operating table, a couple of easy chairs, a cabinet of instruments and medicine bottles heterogeneously mixed, and a new electric sterilizer which was his pride.

An open door showed his unmade bed in the tiny adjoining bed-room and a second door revealed a cookstove in the lean-to behind the shack, with a coffee pot in place and a shelf full of canned food above it.

Doc Brigham craned his neck cautiously around. On his left, holding the gun that bore into his side, was a slender, whiplike man in dark business clothes—a man with a sallow complexion that to the discerning eye told its own story of Chinese blood mixed with white.

It was his own gun that Louis Chang, gambler and killer, was jamming in his ribs, the little doctor saw. The old revolver that in the earlier decades of his practice he had had to use more than once, swiftly and accurately.

Chang held the gun in his right hand. His left arm hung limply at his side, and his sleeve from the shoulder to the elbow was stiff and dark with clotted blood.

On Doc Brigham's right, a modern automatic held closely but watchfully

in his hand, was the big man the radio had called Bobo Bronson. A round babyface stared down at Jeff, and mild blue eyes blinked inquiringly at him.

"You the doc, hey?" Bobo Bronson questioned. "You got no wife, huh? You don't never clean up either, do you? This place sure needs a woman's touch, doc."

"Shut up!" Chang's voice was sharp and ragged, like the edges of a broken bottle. "Of course he's the doc. What do you care whether he's got a dame or not? Move over there, doc, and then turn around—over there by the table."

Doc Brigham walked over to his old operating table against the wall, and turned around, his back pressed against it.

His pale blue eyes were mild and expressionless but they missed nothing. The big man, Bobo, had put away his automatic, but the revolver in Chang's hand still held steady on Jeff's chest. The Eurasian was wounded, and Bronson looked slow. Maybe he could make a dash for it. The window a few feet away was open, with only a screen in it. He could throw himself through it—

IT WAS the thought of Mrs. Jacobs that stopped him. Before the night was over she was going to need him, and if he had diagnosed matters rightly, need him pretty badly. And the old gun in the gambler's hand shot straight and true when a steady hand held it.

Jeff Brigham abandoned the idea of making a leap through the window. He had to get out of this, if he got out of it at all, unwounded. He'd have to

think of something better than that.

"All right, Bobo," Chang directed. "Pull down the shades. Tight. Then take some tape out of his bag there and tape him up good."

A minute later Jeff was securely taped, hand and foot, with adhesive from his own kit. The big man ran a dozen lengths around his ankles, and then half a dozen more about his crossed wrists.

Chang put down the revolver and surveyed the little doctor critically.

"That'll hold him," he grumbled. "We aren't quite ready to finish him yet. Come on now, Bobo, I gotta get this arm fixed. Gimme those surgical scissors. Now help me cut this sleeve away."

Taking no more notice of Jeff, the gambler turned his attention to his wounded shoulder. With swift clipped instructions, he directed his companion in cutting away the bloodsoaked sleeves and in removing the coat and the shirt beneath it. Then with alcohol and cotton batting from Jeff Brigham's supplies, he cleaned up the arm and swabbed the purplish area surrounding an ugly little black spot in the flesh beneath his shoulder.

Bobo dug a roll of three-inch bandage out of Jeff's black bag and with it they improvised a secure sling for the injured arm.

"Just a flesh wound, wouldn't you say, doc?" Chang asked with a thin-lipped grin, as Bobo helped him into Jeff's Sunday shirt and coat. "Bullet went through the muscles and out again. It'll heal quickly if infection doesn't set in. And I don't think it will. Good thing the sucker didn't aim a little

more to the right, wasn't it? He might have gotten a lung then—and saved your life. But a knife in the middle is bad for the aim."

Jeff surveyed him steadily and made no answer. There was no use in pleading, no use in mentioning Mrs. Jacobs and her need for him. The Eurasian had about as much compassion in him as a diamond-back. Maybe Jeff should have tried for the window after all.

But it was too late for that now. While the two men worked, dressing Chang's wound, Jeff had been pondering furiously. If, now, Sheriff Andy would come by—but he wouldn't. He was set for the night up there by the useless barrier atop the hill, waiting for these men who had already passed.

They must have coasted past with the motor dead to avoid attracting attention, having seen the sheriff's lights, Jeff figured. Coming down hill like that, they could have drifted all the way through town and out here without making a sound, as silent as a pair of ghosts flitting through the night.

No, the sheriff was out. And there wasn't much likelihood of any other visitors, this time of night. Cochino went to bed early, and slept soundly. Nick Jacobs might phone again. But when the phone wasn't answered, naturally he'd think it was because Jeff was on the way.

Louis Chang grinned, as if reading Jeff's mind. "Nope, pop," he said, "there ain't a chance. Nobody's gonna come to your rescue. Nobody knows we come this way. Nobody's gonna, either. Sort of cute of us to float through with our motor off, wasn't it?"

"But we had to stop, though," Bobo Bronson put in, "on account of we burned out our bearings coming up them grades at sixty."

"Shut up, Bobo," Chang said. "Yeah, doc, we burned out our bearings on those blasted eighteen-mile grades east of here, trying to get by before the news flash about us went out. Guess we made it, too. Our radio brought it in just as we were pulling into your empty garage. This is the last town between us and the state line, and once we get out of here nobody'll stop us. We fooled 'em all, heading west instead of east."

He grinned and his eyes were ugly. "Besides," he added, "we're wanted, east. But it's all right. We'll leave our heap locked up in your garage and take your flivver. By morning we'll be over the line. You, doc—well, you'll be sleeping tight in some ravine along the way, with the rattlesnakes and the gophers nibbling at your toes. And before anybody misses you or finds our car in your garage, we'll have reached the Coast, or maybe Mexico."

As CHANG talked, his big companion was moving restlessly around the room, picking up and putting things down like a kid.

"What's this for, doc?" he inquired conversationally, squinting at a dentist's forceps. "Pulling teeth? You're a jack of all trades, ain't you? What else do you do besides doctoring and dentisting? Don't you get lonely out here, doc? This country gives me the creeps. I like the city. How long you been here, doc?"

"Shut up, Bobo," Chang repeated, an edge of irritation coming into his voice. "Go out back there and get some grub. We want to be prepared in case anything goes wrong and we have to hide out. Gather up anything you can find and bring it in here. See if there's any liquor."

Bobo hurried out, and Jeff could hear him rummaging around in the lean-to kitchen. The Eurasian stood for a moment longer appraising Jeff, taking in the bowed legs, the creased and weather-beaten countenance, the faded blue eyes, the thinning hair, and the general air of helplessness of the bound man.

"Too bad you came home when you did, doc," he said. "Guess your luck was just running wrong."

Jeff eyed him steadily in return. His brain was still churning futilely. There was a chance—just one. To reach Nick Jacobs' ranch, he would have had to retrace his path, go up the hill past the sheriff's barrier. If he didn't go by soon, maybe Andy would get curious and come see what was keeping him. Maybe not. But it was a chance. If he could keep alive long enough.

So, though there was no answer called for, he gave one. The only thing he could do was talk. Talk, and maybe somehow hold the gambler's attention while the minutes ticked by until Andy Hicks should get curious and drive up this way.

"Maybe," Jeff Brigham said, "and maybe not. I ain't rightly had any chance to draw cards in this game of yours yet and see where I stand. P'raps when I do—"

Chang took a shotgun from the corner, where it leaned in company with some splints for broken bones, and laid it across the arms of an easy chair. From a shelf he took a box of shells and put them with the gun, his movements lithe and pantherlike. Bobo came in from the lean-to with an armful of canned goods that he dumped into a pillow case taken from Jeff's bed.

"Talk all you like, doc," Chang said negligently. "Stall as hard as you can and bluff all you want to. But don't think it'll get anywhere. We hold the aces in this game, and there's no way for bluff to beat them."

"Maybe," Jeff replied, taking at random while his brain still raced, with increasing hopelessness. "Maybe." And then, perhaps because these men were gamblers, perhaps because of what Chang had said, the old joke he had been about to tell Joe Colfax half an hour before came back into his mind.

"Maybe," Jeff repeated coolly, "but I call to mind an old riddle that was thought right humorous when I was a boy. It seems that once a gambler, a coroner, and a Chinaman were playing poker."

Unexpectedly Jeff got a reaction. Chang whirled toward him and with an open palm slapped Jeff across the mouth so hard that involuntary tears of pain came to his eyes.

"Don't," the Eurasian said with deadly quietness, "call me a Chinaman. Or you'll die a lot harder than you figure to!"

Jeff licked his stinging lips in silence, a little frown on his forehead. There was an idea coming to him, just the

glimmering of a wild idea. And yet, maybe . . . The old gag had won him many a money bet in his day. Perhaps he could make it win the biggest bet of all, his life. Chang didn't like to be called a Chinaman. And Bobo—

"Watch him, Bobo," the Eurasian, snarled, swinging around. "That's enough grub. I'm going out to look over his jalopy. We'll be ready to leave in a couple of minutes." He eased cautiously out the front door of the shack.

Bobo Bronson shook his head. "He has a terrible temper, doc," he said. "An awful temper. He's only part Chinese, and he sure hates to have anybody call him a Chinaman. He sure does. It just does something to him. Drives him wild. That's why we're on the lam now. This guy in Granite Valley we were playing poker with caught him dealing off the bottom and called him a cheating Chinaman, see? Chang knifed him in the belly and the other guy shot him. Chang didn't ought to kill him just for that. But he just can't stand being called a Chinaman."

"I wasn't going to call him a Chinaman," Jeff Brigham said, with an aggrieved air. "I was just going to tell him a riddle. A funny one. About a Chinaman, a gambler, and a coroner."

HE TOLD the riddle, as he had told it earlier to Joe Colfax, and Bobo Bronson sucked his lip like a child concentrating.

"Say, that's a good one, isn't it?" he exclaimed. "That's a honey. The gambler held four aces and the Chinaman a royal flush, the coroner took the pot. Now how could he, huh?"

Jeff Brigham shrugged and his eyes were blandly innocent.

"Well, rightly speaking it's a kind of a trick answer," he told the curious Bobo. "I'd have to show you. If my hands were free and I had a pack of cards, I could make it plain, I guess."

Bobo shook his head regretfully.

"Well," Doc Brigham said craftily, "you take this tape off my hands for a second. My feet would still be tied and it wouldn't do any harm. There's some cards over there and I could show you. Maybe you could make some money on it, betting with people you meet."

The little doctor saw curiosity tugging at Bobo's impulses, and winning.

"Well, I guess that's right," he agreed. "You say I could make money on it, betting with people? And you couldn't do any harm with your feet tied."

He unwound the length of adhesive that held Jeff's wrists together and laid it on the operating table.

His ears alert for any sound from without, Jeff rifled through the cards.

"It goes like this," he said to the intently watching Bobo. "You lay out the hands, see, and—"

He stopped. The footsteps he had been waiting for sounded outside the door, and a moment later Chang had slid back into the room.

"What's going on?" he snapped, and on cat feet came close to Jeff. "Bobo! Why'd you undo his hands?"

In the face of Chang's anger, Bobo Bronson gulped uneasily. But Jeff stared at the Eurasian steadily.

"It's nothing to make a fuss about," he drawled. "He just undid my hands so I could show him my riddle, the one

I started to tell you. The one about the gambler, the Chinaman, and—"

Chang's narrow face twisted with anger. Jeff had pinned all his plan, such as it was, on the belief that Chang would not shoot because of the distance—the sound of a shot would carry. And he was right. Instead, the man swung the barrel of the revolver viciously at Jeff's face.

Jeff weaved, and the muzzle of the gun flashed past his eyes. At the same instant Jeff's hand shot upwards, and his left reached out to seize up the mess of sticky tape that had come off his wrists. The cards that had been in his hand cascaded to the floor as he went into action.

His right hand caught the revolver above the trigger guard as the momentum of Chang's swing carried it to a point past Jeff's shoulder. Startled, the Eurasian tried to wrest it back. The weapon exploded once, the bullet ripping into the floor and the shot filling the little room with noise.

BEHIND HIM, Bobo Bronson, his face ludicrous with surprise, took a step forward to interfere, reaching into his pocket for his big automatic.

But the big man was still three strides away as Jeff swung up his left hand, with the sticky tangle of tape he had grabbed up, and plastered the stuff into Chang's unprotected face, full across the nose and eyes.

Chang squalled again. With only one good hand to free his eyes, he had to let go of the gun. His instincts played him false. He relinquished the gun to snatch at the tape that was blind-

The Coroner's Hand

ing him, and a fraction of an instant later Jeff was settling the butt of his old Peacemaker firmly into his palm.

Louis Chang whipped the adhesive off his face and reached for the gun again before Jeff could bring the muzzle around and squeezed the trigger. He grabbed the barrel and pulled. The gun kicked in Jeff's hand. The powder blast seared Chang's wrist and the gambler squawked with pain, his fingers letting go of the barrel of their own accord.

Behind him Bobo Bronson stopped abruptly. Then, a curiously blank expression on his face, he bent slowly forward and toppled over sideways with a crash that shook the little shack.

Chang, making animal sounds in his throat, flung himself backwards and dropped to his knees to scrabble for the automatic that Bobo had dropped as he fell. He scooped it up and kneeling, leveled it at Jeff Brigham.

Jeff couldn't fire his Peacemaker. The tape that had been in Chang's hands had stuck to the hammer. Jeff thrust with his elbow and threw up his weight to one side, letting his knees go limp. The shot screamed past his head and Jeff hit the floor with a jar that almost shook the Peacemaker from his hand.

His mouth open as if he were cursing without sound, Chang swung the automatic around, and a lance of red leaped from its muzzle. Something plucked at Jeff's sleeve. Then Jeff had the tape free from the hammer, and lying on his side, thumbed it back.

The old Peacemaker thundered once.

But once was enough. A small black spot sprang into being on Louis Chang's forehead, just above the bridge of the

nose. Then the man fell forward on his face, the gun clattering to the floor.

It was all over as quickly as that. Jeff Brigham took a deep breath, sat up and unwound the tape from his ankles, and hobbled over to Bobo Bronson.

The big man was trying vainly to raise himself on his elbow.

"Doc," he gasped. "Doc, I guess I'm done for, huh? And Chang? Is he dead, doc?"

"As dead as Moses," Doc Brigham said grimly and bent over the big man. A moment's examination told him there was nothing he could do. Bobo lay looking up at him, his eyes agonized.

"Gosh, doc," he said weakly. "You planned it, didn't you? You got me to untie your hands. Then you made Chang mad. Didn't you, doc?"

Jeff Brigham nodded.

Feebly the dying man shook his head. "We held all the aces, and you won. Just like the riddle."

For a moment painful concentration furrowed his brow.

"Doc," he gasped hoarsely, "can't you—tell me the answer now? I'd sort of—like to know. What was it that the coroner held, doc?"

Doc Brigham hesitated. Then it was too late.

The gasping voice died away. There was a little thump as the uplifted head hit the floor, and a last frothy bubble between the lips burst and was gone.

It was too late, but he gave Bobo the answer.

"He held an inquest," the coroner of Cochino County said.

But it was an answer that never would be funny again. ♦♦♦

Long before Frederick Nebel's byline became a by-word on the pages of leading national magazines, the words, "A Sergeant Brinkhaus Story," were an iron-clad guarantee to thousands of readers that their next half hour would be thoroughly enjoyable. For in all the annals of detective literature, there is no law officer quite so ungrammatically engaging and so bumblingly nice as Nebel's inimitable flatfoot. But, as Brinkhaus would say, was I you, I'd let the joe speak for himself.

The Green Widow

by FREDERICK NEBEL

HERMAN BRINKHAUS, sergeant of detectives, made his prosaic way down Edgemont Street at 11:30 of a windless, cold night. Edgemont Street, a thoroughfare of fine shops, was deserted at this hour, and the methodical fall of the stocky sergeant's large, substantial shoes echoed with sharp clarity from block to block.

Ahead he saw a uniformed figure standing beneath a corner street lamp. He knew it would be Patrolman Huneker, on peg post, eight blocks of Edgemont Street.

"Hello, Gus."

"You're keeping bad hours, Brinky."

"I was on my way home on the Latervale trolley, so I got off and walked down to see you."

"What's up, Brinky?"

Brinkhaus shrugged. "Nothing, Gus." He pulled off his right glove, thrust

his hand into his pocket and drew out a small roll of bills.

"I took the boys for a little dough at pinochle in the back room tonight, Gus, and here's them five bucks I owe you."

"Hell, Brinky, you didn't need to worry about that." But Huneker took the bill; shoved it into his pocket.

"I'll be seeing you some time, Gus," Brinky said, and turned away.

But the sound of hurrying footsteps stopped him. He lingered on the curb, looked east on Harrow Street and saw a shape coming toward them. The footfalls were irregular. They were sharp, staccato; they were the high, hard heels of a woman in haste.

A voice cried: "Officer—officer!"

Huneker spun his nightstick sharply, stretched his legs in a fast walk up Harrow. Brinkhaus went after him. The

woman had broken into an irregular run.

Brinkhaus caught up with him. The woman stopped running, but she walked rapidly toward them and they could hear the sound of quick breathing.

"A man—in the gutter up the street—near Westover—"

She stopped, still poised for flight. In the dim light between street lamps they saw that she was young, colored, neatly dressed.

"I came up Westover and turned the corner and there was the man. There was blood all over him—"

"O. K., Gus," Brinkhaus grunted, and broke into a run.

Huneker joined him and the two men, both heavy, pounded their feet on the wide sidewalk, crossed Lynn Street and galloped on toward Westover. They reached the corner, split up; one crossed the street and the other looked down Westover.

Huneker called: "See anybody, Brinky?"

"Nope. You?"

"No."

They stood for a moment looking at each other across the silent square. Then, far distant, they heard a crash. Unmistakably it was the crash of glass. Huneker reared around. But Brinkhaus was already on the run back toward Edgemont Street, and in an instant Huneker followed, drawing his gun. They reached Edgemont, looked up and down. In a nearby side-street they heard the blast of an automobile engine quickly accelerated.

Huneker said: "Down the street," and pointed as he ran.

Brinkhaus barged past him, his coat tails flying. Midway down the block he stopped, and Huneker, coming up out of breath, stopped also.

Glass lay on the sidewalk. Plate glass out of a shop window. In the window glowed a green light, shining on a small black velvet pedestal. There was no other object in the window. A brass plate had been riveted to the building beside the window; it bore a simple legend: *Simonson, Jeweler*.

Huneker pointed at the velvet pedestal. "Somebody h'isted the Green Widow out of Simonson's."

BRINKHAUS HAD RUN to the next block, stopped beneath the street lamp there. His drawn gun glinted as he turned about. The last echoes of a departing car had died away. The sergeant craned his short, stocky neck, swiveled and struck his heels sharply up Edgemont. Huneker was standing on wide-spread feet and methodically going through a repertoire of low, bitter oaths.

"Like babes in the woods we were!" he complained.

"Was I you, Gus," Brinkhaus said, "I'd ring in right off. They'll have to notify Simonson."

"Being took by a skirt!"

"Well, then you park here, Gus, and I'll ring in for you."

"Been on this beat now for six years and never—"

But Brinkhaus was on his way. There was a callbox at Edgemont and Clark, and he rang in, gave the details in a flat, dull voice. Then he hung up and started back down the hill.

"I'll get holy hell for this," Huneker

said. "You watch, Brinky. I was took like a sap. I been hearing this Green Widow was worth ninety thousand bucks! Bucks, Brinky! I was just looking at it half an hour ago—the way it laid there, big and green in the green light—and not another stone in the whole window. I'm asking you now. Ninety thousand!"

"Gus, begging your pardon, but suppose you move your foot over."

Huneker moved and Brinkhaus bent down and picked up a small handkerchief.

"Turn on your flash, Gus."

Huneker switched on his flashlight. It was a lady's handkerchief, white, plain, still folded. Brinky unfolded it and searched for an initial. There was none.

"What's that on it, Brinky?"

"Lipstick, I guess. This ain't worth a damn, Gus. We got to start from scratch."

A precinct car arrived with a sweep of spotlights and a squeal of brakes. A bullet-headed precinct skipper swung out and the man at the wheel whipped one of the spotlights around so that it sprayed blinding radiance on the shattered shop window.

The skipper stared at the glass on the sidewalk and listened stonily while Huneker related what had happened. In the end he toed a piece of glass.

"Tough, Huneker." He strode up to the window, stared for a moment at the velvet pedestal, then wheeled sharply. "This ain't going to be so hot. The assistant district attorney is batting for the D. A. and he's hell on the Department. You know that. He's going to

jump all over us for this." He frowned. "Why the hell didn't you tell the Jane to wait?" He shrugged. He was a level-headed man and could realize how Huneker had been so easily duped. He looked at Brinkhaus. "Any ideas, Brinky?"

"Got to start from scratch."

They turned at the sound of an approaching motor and saw headlights coming down Edgemont. A black sedan drew up and Simonson, the jeweler, stepped out. He was a tall, lean man, well dressed.

"Crashed, eh?" he said.

Huneker said: "That green emerald you had in the window—"

Simonson cut in: "What else?"

"Why, there was nothing else. Leastwise—"

"Door forced?"

"Uh, no, but—"

"I see." Simonson strode to the shattered window, looked at the pedestal, at the little depression on top where The Green Widow had lain. He asked for a flashlight and sprayed it back of the pedestal, back of a velvet drape; made a thorough search with his fingers. Then he went to the door, tried it. It was locked.

"That's all right, gentlemen," he said, turning. He lifted his lean, smooth-shaven face, and a twinkle appeared in his eyes. "You see," he nodded cursorily to the broken window, "it was not the genuine Widow."

Huneker, angered, exclaimed: "What!"

"Soft pedal," the precinct skipper clipped.

Huneker blushed. "I beg your par-

don." He chuckled. "I guess I ought to be happy." He beamed. "I am!"

Simonson was fifty or so, but well preserved, good humored. "Naturally," he said, "I should hesitate to leave the genuine stone in the window overnight. The one in there tonight was a perfect imitation. Worth only about two hundred. The window, of course, is insured. So you needn't worry, officer. I can be thankful my shop wasn't forced."

The precinct skipper said: "Huneker's on peg post but I'll shoot a man over from the house to stay in your store till you can get the window fixed."

"Excellent." Simonson jangled keys, opened the heavy door, switched on lights inside. He ran his eyes over the showcases, around the store. It was a small, narrow shop. It was known that Simonson dealt only in the finest gems, that he was an expert; a lover of gems as well as a dealer in them. "Everything's all right, gentlemen."

"Try your safe, maybe," offered Brinkhaus.

"Might as well." Simonson went to the rear of the shop, called back: "Nothing's been touched in the store. Obviously the thief was after The Green Widow."

Brinkhaus said: "Anybody been in lately asking to buy it?"

"It's not for sale, you know."

"I didn't know."

"Not for sale. One of my treasures. I picked it up in Siam four years ago. Originally there were two, identical. The other was lost fifty years ago and never recovered. A Siamese prince then named this one The Green Widow. I'll show it to you."

The precinct skipper drifted up and joined Brinkhaus, and Gus Huneker craned his neck from a distance. Simonson opened his safe, unlocked an inner compartment, took out a square black box. The cover clicked open as he held the box out.

"The thief, you see, thinks he has this one," Simonson said.

Huneker came closer. "Me, I couldn't tell the difference."

Simonson chuckled, lifted the gem with thumb and forefinger, rocked on his heels. "You see, gentlemen, this one . . ." He paused, squinted at the large green stone. He screwed a glass into his eye, stepped beneath a light. His face hardened. His hand shook. He turned and stared wild-eyed at the men.

The precinct skipper said: "What's wrong?"

"This," said Simonson, "is the imitation!"

Huneker groaned: "Oh, Lord!"

INSPECTOR PETER LARSON was a tall man with yellow hair. He headed Portsend's Detective Bureau. Sitting at his broad desk next morning, he read the entire account of the sensational jewel robbery in Edgemont Street. Finished, he sat back, started a thin brown cigar. He was inhaling the first pleasant drafts when the door opened and Assistant District Attorney Wells Gatlin came in.

"Morning, Gatlin," he said.

"I guess you read about that boner in Edgemont Street last night, huh?" There was a mean, wicked glitter in Gatlin's shoe-button eyes. He was a

small man, bitter-mouthed, rasp-voiced. He rolled his eyebrows, waved his head from side to side. "And I see that prize tomato of yours is mixed up in it. Day by day, night by night, I am continually amazed that such blockheadedness should make up our police force."

Larsen puffed. "Accident, Gatlin. These things happen. Brinky and Huneker were accosted by a young Negress who told them a man was lying in a gutter."

"Nuts! I've heard all that already." He jammed his hands into hip pockets, warped his tight-lipped mouth. "I could understand a couple of kids falling for a line like that, but I can't—" He sighed, nodded. "Yes, I can, I guess. Considering the apes, I guess I can understand."

The door opened and Brinkhaus walked in looking at a newspaper. "Morning, chief. I see here where that bill was put through and it means I got to fork over an assessment of \$650 for the new curbing and paving up my street. Morning, Mr. Gatlin. Nice weather we're having."

"Yes. It was a nice night, too, wasn't it?"

"Well, I could have stood it a little warmer."

Gatlin smirked. "Oh, then it wasn't hot enough, eh?" He bared his teeth in a malicious grin. "Maybe I got it wrong. Maybe the gentleman seen in Edgemont Street wasn't Sergeant Brinkhaus after all."

Brinkhaus stared at the newspaper. "It was," he said placidly.

"Gatlin," Larsen said crisply, "Brinky and I have a few things to talk over. Will you drop in later?"

Gatlin chuckled dryly, went to the door. He paused. "You notice the way the paper kidded your department, don't you?" He chuckled again and left.

Brinkhaus sat down, made a face, stared at his hands. "Boss," he said thickly, "I'm asking you if maybe you can't lend a hand about Gus Huneker. The razzing the paper gave him this morning, and what I just heard downstairs, Gus is liable to be suspended for a spell. He can't afford it, Peter. It wasn't his fault at all. This woman come running up and, shucks, there was nothing me and Gus could do but what we did. Gus has got a big family. It was my fault as much as his, but Gus gets hell because it was his beat. Any chance, boss?"

"I don't know, Brinky. I'll see. It's a wrong neighborhood to have anything go wrong. The emerald's worth ninety thousand."

"Insured?"

"Yes. But this man Simonson is a nut on emeralds, apparently; especially this one. He feels that even the insurance money will not repay him for the loss of the prize in his collection. I want you to go down to his shop, Brinky. He has a clerk there. Quiz the clerk."

Brinkhouse put on his homburg and went down to the central room. But he paused at the door, turned about and made his way downstairs to the laboratory. Craike, the expert in charge, was donning a white jacket.

Brinkhaus said: "Phil, there's some stuff on this handkerchief I picked up in Edgemont Street last night. Looks

like maybe it was stepped on, though first off, last night, I thought it was lipstick. See if you can analyze it. I'll be seeing you."

He left the laboratory, cut through the pistol range and entered the Headquarters garage. Johnny Pell, his aide and chauffeur, was on the losing end of an attempt to polish the bright work of the shabby flivver.

"Down to Edgemont Street, Johnny. To Simonson's."

CHAPTER TWO

BRINKHAUS RESET his homburg dead-level on his head and held on to the side of the car as Johnny Pell snaked it wildly through the traffic. They headed west on Central Boulevard, turned south at Civic Park, and took a ramp to Park Boulevard. They crossed the Post Road and hummed down Edgemont Street. Glaziers were putting final touches to Simonson's new window.

"You wait here, Johnny," Brinkhaus said.

He entered the store and found a young man running a cloth over one of the showcases. The man was thin, pallid. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and said, "Good morning, sir," in a soft, quiet voice.

"I'm Brinkhaus from the cops. Could I see Mr. Simonson?"

The young man appeared to become a little nervous, but he said: "Yes, yes, of course. Just wait a moment."

Simonson received Brinkhaus, grave-faced but alert. "Officer Huneker," he said, "dropped in a few minutes ago to

say again how sorry he was. Naturally I am sorry, too." He shrugged, made a wry little smile. "It may be difficult for you to understand how I feel about the loss of *The Green Widow*. I am, you see, a lover of gems. I loved *The Green Widow* as much—and this may sound absurd, but it's nonetheless true—I love *The Green Widow* as much as some men love their children. Jewels have their fascination. It's like that." He tapped once more on the desk, left his fist resting firmly on the surface, stared at it.

"Huneker is really sorry, Mr. Simonson. He's kind of proud that during all the time he's been on this beat there ain't been a break, except this one. I come down specially this morning to kind of ask you not to go too hard on him."

"I had no intention, Sergeant. I suppose I could raise a lot of trouble, but on the other hand doing that sort of thing might impede the progress of the search. The stone has been stolen. The thing is to get it back." He slapped the desk. "I'd rather pay forty thousand dollars for its recovery than receive the insurance money on it."

Mention of so large a sum did not faze Brinkhaus. He said: "You forgot to change the stones last night before closing?"

"No." Simonson leaned back. "My clerk, Mr. Hazley, changed the stones. He took the genuine *Widow* out of the window at five last evening. He took it, as he always has taken it, to the safe. He must have become confused. He'd broken his glasses that afternoon and perhaps that was the reason. At any

rate, he must have returned the genuine stone to the window instead of the imitation."

"How long's this Mr. Hazley worked for you?"

"Five years."

"Married?"

"Happily." Simonson leaned forward, half shrugged, then broke into a wry smile. "My dear Sergeant, you're not suspecting Hazley?" He raised a palm. "Don't—please. The poor chap's nervous as it is." He dropped his voice, spoke earnestly: "I might add, Sergeant, that he's not too well, either. I should hate to have you be rough with him. Lungs, I think. I offered him a sum of money to go away for a year, to the Southwest somewhere. But—" Simonson spread illustrative palms—"he's proud, Sergeant."

"Where's he live?"

"They have a small apartment at 344 Western Avenue." Simonson leaned forward, level-eyed. "I want to make it plain, Sergeant, that I won't stand for any rough stuff against Hazley. The chap's in no condition. I believe him. I have no patience with the error he made, but there were extenuating circumstances. He'd broken his glasses. He is nearsighted—blind, almost without them."

Brinkhaus regarded his hat for a long moment, then shrugged. "I just got to do my duty. I ain't rough, Mr. Simonson." He put on his hat, turned and made his way into the store.

Hazley was rearranging stones in one of the showcases. He flicked Brinkhaus with a covert look.

Brinkhaus said: "Just as a matter of

routine, Mr. Hazley. I suppose you were home at 11:30 last night, huh?"

"No. I was at the Park Social Club. That's a little club I belong to out in our neighborhood. Last night was our semi-monthly meeting."

"There late, huh?"

"I—yes, I guess I was. I think I left at about one."

Brinkhaus pulled on his woolen gloves. "That's very good, Mr. Hazley."

Hazley's nervous hands moved rapidly inside the showcase and he kept his gaze averted. Brinkhaus gave him a lingering look, then turned and plodded to the door.

"What you find?" Johnny Pell said, out on the street.

"I'm having a hard time, Johnny, starting from scratch." Brinky settled into the squeaky seat, nipped the end off a rank stogie, jammed the stogie beneath his squarish hairbrush mustache. "Just in case, Johnny, suppose you drive over to the Park Social Club."

"I gotcha."

Johnny Pell ground industriously at the starter button and after a while Brinkhaus said:

"Was I you, Johnny, I'd turn on the ignition."

POICE HEADQUARTERS hummed with excitement. The so-called Diamond Squad went through the city like an ill wind, turned dubious pawnshops upside down, examined the pawnbrokers books. Bureau files were raked for colored criminals. Negroes and Negresses tagged with the slightest record were hauled on to the carpet, grilled, released if they gave authentic

alibis, slapped into the holdover if their memories seemed negligent.

The able cartoonist of the *Standard* took an uproarious slap at Brinkhaus and Huneker in the noon edition, depicting a uniformed cop and a stocky detective listening to a girl's tearful story while, directly behind their backs, a man was robbing a pedestrian.

"I never wore a derby in my life," said Brinkhaus, otherwise unmoved.

Chief of Police Pentcost, a man easily abashed by the super sales talk of the district attorney's office, gave Patrolman Gus Huneker a pedantic tongue-warming and suspended him for a month without pay. It was the first blemish on an otherwise perfect record, and Huneker took it hard.

Though Brinkhaus was not suspended, newsmen chided him in person and through news columns. Even brother officers joined the bandwagon. Peter Larsen, his immediate boss, was a man who held his tongue in any storm; he held it now. Wells Gatlin, the assistant D.A., drummed questions at the suspects in the holdover for two solid hours, and came out hoarse and with no point gained. Brinkhaus didn't even question the suspects.

At about two that afternoon he had a talk with Craike, the laboratory expert. Following this he hauled Johnny Pell out of a penny ante game and they went down to the garage. A new flock of suspects had been hauled in for questioning and again Brinkhaus had refused to join in the grilling.

"Seems to me you're passing up a lot of chances," Johnny Pell said, starting the flivver.

"I'll let them smart alecks clown around, Johnny. I ain't never gone in for grilling guys just to make a show at being busy. And regarding this address, which maybe you ought to know, it's 344 Western. And how is your missus' swollen glands?"

"Better."

Johnny drove the flivver around City Hall Square, went straight through a safety zone, jumped a stop light and cut off a car on the right turn north into Spruce Avenue.

"This footbrake," Johnny said, "don't work so well. I can use the emergency in a pinch, only that ain't so hot either."

"Pretty soon," said Brinkhaus, getting his breath, "I'm going to take up walking."

Johnny Pell brought the flivver to a stop in front of 344 Western by cramping the right front wheel against the curb.

Brinkhaus entered a small apartment house and climbed three flights of stairs. Rubber runners muffled his footfalls. He rang a bell on the right and in a moment a small, brown-haired woman opened the door.

The sergeant had his hat in his hand, and his unruly cowlick bobbed once as he made a brief bow. "I'm Brinkhaus from the cops, missus."

"Yes?" she said anxiously.

"Could I come in a minute?"

Her round brown eyes searched his broad, placid face. "Well—well, of course. Yes, come in." Her voice was quick, a little breathless, and her round eyes did not leave his face.

Entering a foyer, he was led into a small, comfortable living room that had

a fresh, distinct odor of cleanliness about it.

"Sit down, sir."

He let himself down into a mohair armchair and the woman took a straight-backed chair nearby. She sat on the very edge of it, folded her hands in her lap.

"I seen your husband this morning
He don't look well."

"He—he isn't."

Brinkhaus frowned compassionately. "Hard, ain't it? Once my boy Hermie was took sick with malaria and I say it wasn't pleasant around the house for almost a year. Mr. Simonson seems to think a lot of your husband."

"Yes, he does," she said quickly. "He's been wonderful to Charles and me. He—he wanted to send Charles and me to Santa Fe for a year. Charles wouldn't. It's hard to accept things like that, Mr. Brinkhaus. For Charles it is, anyhow."

BRINKHAUS PUSHED out the crown of his hat, recreased it again. "You find it lonesome in here when Charles goes out to them club meetings?"

Her eyes shimmered. "A little. But I read."

He nodded slowly, his face gentle and kind. "My wife reads a lot when I'm away on night duty, too. I kind of mooched around the club this morning, just to check up on your husband. Not that I suspected him, missus, but it was police routine. Yes, he was there till one o'clock. From nine till one." He paused, looked at his cigar, which he had let go out because he knew most people hated the smell of the brand he smoked. "You were in all that time,

I suppose, Mrs. Hazley?" he inquired.
"Yes."

He looked at her. She was pretty, he saw; small and well formed and a little pale. He imagined her to be in her middle twenties. After a while he looked down at his hands.

"The best check-up I had on your husband," he went on, "was at eleven thirty-five. That was at exactly about the time the robbery was staged."

"Surely you didn't suspect Charles?"

"No, missus. You see, at eleven thirty-five the club operator says Charles come up to her desk and asked her to ring this number here. She rang and rang and there was no answer." He looked at her and repeated blandly: "There was no answer, Mrs. Hazley."

"Oh, then. Yes, I stepped out. I had a headache and I stepped out for a walk. I walked up Western to Spruce and then back again."

Brinkhaus stared at his hands. "That would be, say, about a twenty-minute walk."

"About. It was twelve when I came in again. I remember because the chimes on that clock on the mantel were ringing."

He nodded. "I see. Then you come in at twelve."

"Yes. I remember."

"Missus, at twelve-ten the club operator tried to get you again. She couldn't get you."

The woman's hands gripped the edges of the chair and her eyes widened. "But I tell you I was home!"

"Missus," Brinkhaus said quietly. He said no more, but sat and shook his boxtlike head slowly from side to side.

She gasped: "The phone must have been out of order."

"I figured that way, too. So I asked the phone company if it was. They said no, not so far as they knew."

"But—"

"You were in at twelve-thirty, missus. The third time the club operator got an answer."

Color fled from her face and she sat shaking. "You tried to trap me!"

He was placid: "So where was you then?"

"I—I was out."

He nodded patiently. "That's been settled, Mrs. Hazley."

She ripped her hands from the sides of the chair, started to rise, then grimaced and settled back again, dropping her head. He did not urge her just then.

Presently she looked up, her eyes swimming. "You can make it very hard for me, for Charles," she said.

"I always try to make this here kind of thing as easy as I can, Mrs. Hazley."

"Then please believe me. Please let me keep secret where I was last night."

He shook his head slowly. "I can't, missus. I'm a cop."

She put her head in her hands and Brinkhaus, remaining motionless, waited with a vast patience.

"All right," she said at length, and raised her eyes. "I went to a man's apartment. Charles didn't want to go to the club last night. I urged him to. I—I then went to this man's apartment. But if you tell Charles—please, it won't do any good. It'll hurt him. He's sick. He needs me. I was a beast to do what I did!"

"So what was the man's apartment?"

She said: "His name's Dan Muir. He's—" she dropped her head—"a good friend of Charles', too." She began sobbing.

"Don't be scared, missus." He patted her shoulder a few times. "I'll just check this up and then that's all there'll be to it. Where does this Dan Muir live?"

CHAPTER THREE

DAN MUIR lived in an apartment hotel at 2020 Laurel Drive. The sergeant got Muir's apartment number from the desk clerk and rose in a silent elevator paneled with glass and chromium. The sixth floor corridor was painted gray, had mouse-colored carpets. The doors were gray and studded with chromium knockers.

"Yes?" said a tall, dark man who had opened the door numbered 608.

"You're Mr. Muir?"

"I'm Muir."

"I'm Brinkhaus from the cops."

"Oh." Blue eyes studied Brinkhaus sharply; then Muir said: "Sure, come in."

It was a man's apartment: large, roomy, with a lot of big, heavy armchairs. The men sat down.

"Cigar?"

"Well, yes, I guess I could. They look good."

Brinkhaus lit up from a match held by Muir and Muir said: "I suppose I should be uneasy, officer, but I'm not." He grinned. "Should I be?"

Brinkhaus leaned back. "Nope." He took a long puff. "I just come around

to ask if you entertained a woman last night."

"Yes, I guess I did."

"Who was she?"

Muir rubbed his palms on his knees. "That's an embarrassing question, officer."

"I figured it would be, Mr. Muir. I'm kind of embarrassed myself, kind of. But I got to ask it. I got to clear things up. You got my word of honor that I ain't out to crack any scandal or anything like that. I'm just checking up."

Muir looked up swiftly. "There's nothing between us, officer. She was lonesome and pretty ragged, if you get me. Nerves. She came over and—and I tried to cheer her up."

"Who?"

"Well, if you must know, her name's Mrs. Hazley."

"Good. Now when did she come and when did she leave?"

"She must have got here about nine-thirty. After a while I had some food sent up. She was frightened. She was afraid of even the waiters, and hid in the other room. We had some food and something to drink and time flew and before we knew it it was twelve o'clock. She went, then. Wouldn't even risk taking the elevator. Conscience-stricken. Walked down the fire stairway. I told her not to be foolish. We're old friends. I've known her husband for twelve years—her for fifteen, since we were kids. What are you trying to hang on her, officer?"

"Nothing, Mr. Muir. I'm just checking up. Little by little I got to check off my leads. My father used to say that in cutting a road through the woods you

come first to the little trees, but you got to get them out of the way just the same."

He stood up. "Thanks for bothering with me, Mr. Muir. I ain't had such a swell cigar since I went to Otto Horn-dorfer's clambake five years ago."

He went downstairs, lingered in the lobby for a while, then asked to be shown the way to the steward. A bell-hop escorted him and for a few moments Brinkhaus talked with a short, fat Swiss. Finally the Swiss called a waiter who was in the act of donning livery.

Brinkhaus said to the waiter: "The steward here says you were the man what hauled all that food and ginger ale up to 608."

"Yes, it was me."

"Supper for two, huh?"

"That's right."

"How many bottles of ginger ale?"

"I can look it up."

In a few moments the waiter returned and said: "Took up six bottles, all told. Two to begin with, two later, and two after that."

"What would you say now is the only use for ginger ale?"

"Me? Rye highballs."

Brinkhaus dipped his head toward the waiter, toward the Swiss steward. "Thanks."

Returning to the street, he found Johnny squatting and eyeing the right front wheel.

"Now what, Johnny?"

"Oh, nothing. There's a blister on that tire there. Been there for three days now. I'm wondering if maybe we'll get a blowout sometime."

Brinkhaus took two slow puffs on his cigar. "Johnny, I'm going to take a little walk. I think walking's good for a man at times. Be seeing you."

Edgemont Street saw him next.

"And what can I do for you, Sergeant?" Simonson said.

"Well," said Brinkhaus, "I just want to ask Mr. Hazley two simple questions."

"Really, don't you think he's been sufficiently persecuted?"

"I ain't persecuting anybody, Mr. Simonson. These here two questions are simple and they don't concern Mr. Hazley. And I'll ask you, Mr. Simonson, to leave us alone. It won't take a minute."

Simonson said curtly: "Very well." He strode stiffly into the office, closed the door.

"Well," Hazley breathed, "what it is, what is it?" He dabbed at his face with his handkerchief, kept wetting his lips.

Brinkhaus said: "Does your wife touch liquor?"

"No. Never took a drop."

"Better speak the truth."

"I am."

"For instance, if you went home last night you'd have known she'd been drinking if she had been drinking, wouldn't you?"

"I tell you, sir, my wife has never touched liquor!"

Brinkhaus nodded. "Okay. Now tell me how much money you got in the bank?"

"Nothing. Not a cent. Every cent I make we spend—for doctors, for living."

"That's all, Mr. Hazley. Good day."

MUIR OPENED the door of 608. He had an overcoat slung over his arm. He said: "Well, hello. I was just about to go out."

"I won't take long. Can I come in?"

"I don't suppose there'd be any use in my objecting. Come in."

"You're what I call a downright sensible man, Mr. Muir."

They walked into the living room but did not take chairs. Brinkhaus rubbed the underside of his left arm against the crown of his hat and said: "You did a lot of drinking last night, huh?"

"Well, Mrs. Hazley was kind of in the dumps."

"Uh-huh. I asked the waiter downstairs. He said he brought up six bottles of ginger ale. Said he brought up the last pair at eleven o'clock."

"Of course," Muir said affably, but his sharp blue glance trained steadily on Brinky's downcast, thoughtful eyes.

"To use six bottles of ginger ale two folks would have to drink one hell of a lot of liquor, wouldn't they?"

"I said we did."

"I remember. Say about three highballs to a bottle of ginger ale. Six times three'd be eighteen highballs. Nine a piece, or being conservative, say twelve for you and six for the lady."

"What in the devil are you driving at?"

"Trying to clear up some snags, Mr. Muir. Even if a woman is used to drinking, six highballs'd kind of now make her tight. If she wasn't used to drinking, six highballs'd make her tighter than hell. Huh?"

Muir's eyes narrowed. "Will you please explain yourself?"

"I guess I'm dumb, but I'm trying hard. I'm trying hard to make you see, Mr. Muir, that if Mrs. Hazley drank six highballs she would have gone home kind of on her ear."

"Well?"

"I don't think she went home on her ear."

"Go on."

Brinkhaus shrugged. "I figure I got to know where you were between eleven and midnight last night."

"I was here."

"Who can prove it?"

"Mrs. Hazley."

Brinkhaus sighted down the crown of his hat. "And then of course you can prove that she was here."

"Naturally."

"Mrs. Hazley's husband'll probably knock your story into a cocked hat or something."

"I don't see how."

"He can swear, I expect, that when he came home last night his wife was stark sober. As a matter of fact, Mr. Hazley just said that his wife never touched liquor. That being the case, when she went home last night she would have been drunk and he would have smelled the liquor."

Muir leaned back on his heels, tightened his lips, stared hard at the sergeant.

Brinkhaus said: "The Edgemont Street jewel robbery took place at 11:35. You can't prove where you were between eleven and twelve."

Muir said sharply: "I've nothing more to say."

"I'm being easy as I can on you and the woman. If you dished me up the

truth I could go a long ways to help you. I could—um—keep the woman's name out of it."

"Do you mean to stand there and say that Mrs. Hazley and I connived to rob that shop? Nonsense. You know damned well a Negress was involved—"

"Wasn't, Mr. Muir." He drew the little handkerchief from his pocket. "I picked this up at the scene. First off, I figured, hell, it was lipstick, the street being kind of dark there. Next morning I seen it wasn't. So I had it analyzed. This smudge you see here, Mr. Muir, is a kind of stain actors use to make themselves up for Negro roles. That woman was a white woman operating as a decoy."

Muir took a backward step and his eyes shimmered. He snapped: "I don't believe it!"

"We'll go pick up Mrs. Hazley and then mooth over to Headquarters. I hate to do it, but I offered to make a deal with you and you give me a waltz-me-around-again-Willie."

Muir stood motionless, staring, for a long minute. Then his jaw set. He put his overcoat on savagely, snatched up a pair of gloves.

"Come on," he snapped. "Do your damnedest then!"

CHAPTER FOUR

TWILIGHT WAS falling rapidly when they alighted in front of the Western Avenue address. Mrs. Hazley opened the door and a little cry caught in her throat. Brinkhaus motioned Muir to enter, then followed and closed the door.

The woman gripped Brink's arm.
"Don't! Please don't!"

"Missus, I ain't enjoying this a bit but I got to do my duty."

Hazley stepped into the foyer from the living room. He had just come home, had removed his coat and stood in vest and shirt sleeves.

"What—what's this?" he asked.

"In," Brinkhaus said.

They went into the little living room, and Hazley threw a puzzled look at Muir. Muir did not look at him but kept his eyes straight ahead, his jaw firm. In the momentary silence that ensued Mrs. Hazley's breath was plainly audible.

Hazley cried: "What is this?" in a cracked voice.

"Mr. Hazley," Brinkhaus said, "will you now just step outside the door for a minute?"

Hazley backed to the foyer door, bit his lip, flung a hostile look at Muir, a baffled look at his wife. Shaking, he stepped out and closed the door.

Mrs. Hazley, her eyes fixed on Brinkhaus, groped her hand for the back of a chair, got hold of it, steadied herself. "What do you want?" she said hoarsely.

Muir cut Brinkhaus off, saying: "I tried to prevent this, Helen, but there was no way I could. I did my best." He spoke in a low, sure voice. "This policeman has tried to implicate us in that Edgemont Street jewel theft. It's silly, because you were at my place—I had to tell him that, Helen—and we both know we were there."

She flung a frightened look at the closed door. "Of course—of course, I was there."

Brinkhaus was becoming grim. "You can't prove it."

"Nor can you prove," Muir said, "that we weren't there."

Brinkhaus looked at him vacantly, said: "I figured I proved it to you, Mr. Muir, that the la-de-da you handed me wouldn't hold water. Was I both you folks, I'd start in using my head. I got you, got you guilty as can be, in action and in talk. You ordered all that ginger ale up last night to make believe you was getting tight. But you didn't get tight. It was just a stall, and it was a good one. Only it didn't just work. The two of you hooked together to lift The Green Widow."

The door opened and Hazley stood there, shaking. "So that was the game!" he cried, glaring at his wife.

"Oh, no!" she pleaded. "Please, Charles—"

"And you!" Hazley flung at Muir. "My friend! My very good friend!" His teeth chattered, and his body trembled. "You rat!"

Muir's face remained stony.

The woman reached out a hand. "Charles, please don't excite yourself. You know that if you do—"

He snarled: "If I do! If I do! What the devil is it to you what I do? So, my dear wife, it was you—you and my old friend Dan Muir." He stopped short, thinned his pale lips. "I see now. When I came home for lunch yesterday, I put my glasses on the desk there while I washed in the bathroom. When I came back, they were on the floor, broken. I thought they had slid off. I see differently now. You knocked them off!"

Muir broke in: "Charles, pull yourself together. Helen did nothing of the sort. I—I asked her to my apartment last night. She came over." He shrugged. "I'm sorry you had to find out. But there it is. We committed no robbery."

"No! But you—"

Brinkhaus chopped in placidly: "Mr. Hazley, when you came home last night, your wife was all right, huh?"

"What do you mean by all right? She was here. Sitting right in that chair. We sat and talked and for a while she sat on my lap."

"She was sober?"

"Of course she was. Stark sober."

"You didn't even smell no liquor like?"

"Not a breath of it."

BRINKHAUS SMACKED his gloves across his left palm. "All right, Mr. Muir, Mrs. Hazley; you got to come along to Headquarters. Get your things on, missus, and dress warm because it's getting colder out."

She choked: "You're not—"

"I got to kind of pinch you and Mr. Muir for that jewel heist. And while I think of it, you better take a handbag and some extra clothes along. I got an idea they'll keep you for a while."

Muir said crisply: "Go ahead, Helen. Just stick to your story and everything will be all right. Get your things. We'll see this thing through."

Hazley's frenzy had died down. He dragged his feet into the room, slumped to a chair. He ran his hands through his hair, then let them drop and hang limply toward the floor. He wagged

his head hopelessly from side to side.

His voice was dead, flat. "I can't believe it. I can't believe you'd trick me like that, Helen. We always seemed to mean so much to each other. I—" his voice broke—"just can't believe it."

She went and touched him on the shoulder. "Charles. . . ."

"Don't, Helen. I guess I can't blame you. But at first it was such a shock. Please go and leave me here alone for a while. I want to think."

She went from the room but returned in a moment, her face grave. "Charles," she said, "where's that gun?"

"I don't know."

"You do. You always kept it in your bureau drawer. It was there day before yesterday."

"I—I don't know where it is."

She turned and looked at Brinkhaus. "Officer, I can't leave him here alone, I can't."

Muir said: "Take me down, Mr. Brinkhaus. After all, I'm supposed to be the master mind. You can see the shape he's in. It would be criminal to leave him here alone. Come on, let's go."

Brinkhaus said stolidly: "Mrs. Hazley has got to come along. I offered to make a deal with you. This here situation ain't one I like and there's still a chance to spring the truth. I'm after that emerald and I got to get it."

"But, man, don't you see, we haven't got it!" Muir cried.

"Nope. I don't see. You got to go along, Mrs. Hazley."

She snapped: "I won't!" and stood straight, trembling. "I tell you I can't leave my husband the way he is."

Hazley stirred. "You needn't worry about me. There's no use trying to argue with the law, Helen. I'll be all right. I promise."

"You better get your things, Helen," Muir said.

She turned at last and went into another room and reappeared in a few moments dressed for the street. She was grave-faced, round-eyed. Muir took her arm and led her out.

Brinkhaus joined them and they went down the stairs, into the street.

He said: "I'll give you the next three blocks to think it over, then it's all off. That husband of yours looks pretty bad. He might write a farewell letter and then bump himself off."

The woman stopped. "Officer, I—"

"I know. You come across with the truth and we turn around and go back to him. You don't, and we go ahead to Headquarters."

She sobbed: "I do love him!"

The vicious bark of a gun shattered the silence of the street. Brinkhaus took a half-step forward, stopped, blinked, said: "I'm hit. Duck, you two!"

The woman flung herself into a hedgerow, choking: "Charles!"

Muir landed beside her saying: "Quiet, Helen!"

SERGEANT BRINKHAUS shook himself, took a heavy sidewise step, thudded against a tree. He was trying to draw his right hand from his pocket but seemed unable to move it. He reached around with his left hand and thrust it awkwardly into his right-hand pocket and got hold of his gun. His right arm was numb all the way down.

He broke suddenly into a heavy-heeled run at sight of a dim overcoated shape scurrying across a lawn.

His hoarse voice called: "Stop!"

But the figure darted on, only half-seen. Brinkhaus fired and the echoes of the shot spattered up and down the avenue. He jumped from the lawn down into a cement driveway. From the corner of a garage a gun muzzle blazed.

The sergeant ran to the side of the house and pressed along in its dark shadow. He listened and after a moment heard the twang of wire, the sound of clothing being ripped. He started off, made the garage safely, went down along its side wall and came to a wire fence behind. Beyond, somewhere, he heard drumming feet.

He pried his way through the wire. Pain began to knife at his right arm and he gritted his teeth. He felt an odd sickly warmth rising through his body. His big feet crunched on cinders, then rang on flagstones, then thuddled dully on a hard lawn. And then he was in another street, on the run. Up the street, on the other side, the figure was fleeing.

Brinkhaus crossed and plugged on, zigzagging along the lane of the trees. The warmth was rising to his head, flooding it; his eyes felt heavy, his body waterlogged.

He dragged to a stop, propped himself against a tree, raised his left arm and fired three times. He reeled away from the tree and slouched on with short, leaden footsteps; and beneath a street light he came upon a figure lying on the sidewalk, face down.

A cop came running up. "What the

hell's the matter? Stick 'em up. Oh, it's you, sarge!"

"Go call an ambulance—quick."

"Okay, sarge!"

The cop turned and ran up to the nearest house.

Brinky dropped heavily to one knee, pocketed his gun, turned the body over. "Well, Charles, you kind of made a—" He stopped, grunted.

He rubbed his thick fingers across his eyes, took them away and bent down closer to the body on the sidewalk. He chuckled weakly.

The man lying on the sidewalk was Simonson. . . .

Brinkaus came to in a hospital hours later. Inspector Peter Larsen was sitting at the bedside. Larsen leaned over and patted the sergeant's big, thick hand.

"That was swell work, Brinky."

"He was a bum shot, Peter. How is he?"

"Didn't pull through."

"I'm sorry, Peter."

"Simonson had the emerald all the while," Larsen said. "He was almost broke, and he had many offers for The Green Widow. It's hard to understand the man. He was madly in love with it, couldn't bring himself to sell it.

"But he needed money, and the emerald was heavily insured. He had made one imitation, and so he made another. When young Hazley changed the stones that evening, he merely replaced one imitation with another. Simonson planned it all with Hazley's wife."

"Gosh, Peter, I kind of liked that little lady."

"You'll like her better when you

hear. Simonson went on to her and made her the proposition. He offered her five thousand dollars to help him, enough to take her husband away to a climate that would help him. She had courage, Brinky. She went through with it. It was she who broke Hazley's glasses.

"Then that night she stained her face with the dark stuff and acted as the decoy to get Huneker out of Edgemont Street. Simonson was waiting around the corner. He broke the window, got the imitation stone."

"Her and Muir give me a fancy story. I never did believe it."

"He's an old friend of the family. When Mrs. Hazley found out that we were suspecting an inside job, she went to Muir and begged him to help her establish an alibi. He did.

"Simonson was no criminal really, but he lost his head, got panicky. When he saw you taking Mrs. Hazley away he lost his reason. He shot you."

"I kind of feel sorry about her."

Larsen said: "In his confession, Simonson merely mentioned a woman—no name. Muir was the one came to me with a plea of mercy for Mrs. Hazley. Officially she's not on the records. She is home now. My report, still to be completed by you, is that you trailed Simonson, he tried to escape, and you shot and killed him."

Brinkaus let out a vast sigh of relief. "Peter, that sounds like a hunkydory report."

"I reason that way, Brinky. Is there anything you want now?"

"Well, Peter, I guess I'd just like to see Mom." ♦♦♦

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